Guts-and-glory, murder and more during the Mercury’s 150 years

By Rod Kirkpatrick

The Illawarra Mercury will be 150 years old on October 8, but it was a Johnny-come-lately among the daily newspapers in NSW. The Wollongong title did not become a daily until January 9, 1950.

This contrasts sharply with Newcastle, the State’s other steel city, which has the longest continuity of daily publication of any NSW regional city. Newcastle’s first daily was the Pilot, established in 1867 but a daily only from 1874 to 1879, and its second, the Herald, a daily since its establishment in 1876 as the Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners’ Advocate.

Wollongong/Port Kembla did not have a daily paper until the Illawarra Star, established by William Charles Wentworth as a bi-weekly at Port Kembla on September 30, 1937, appeared daily for about a year from some time in 1939. Wentworth printed the paper at Warrawong, a town that he developed after subdividing thousands of acres. The Illawarra Mercury, established in 1855, appeared daily from 1950.

The 30 NSW provincial centres that have attained – but not necessarily maintained – “daily” status did so in the following order: Braidwood, Albury, Singleton, Young, Morpeth, Gulgong, Newcastle, Moama, Dubbo, Goulburn, Bathurst, Wagga Wagga, Narrabri, Broken Hill, Maitland, Orange, Lismore, Blayney, Cobar, Tamworth, Murwillumbah, Grafton, Katoomba, Cootamundra, Casino, Port Kembla, Lithgow, Wollongong, Griffith, Gosford, and Coffs Harbour.

Thomas Garrett, later a prominent politician, established the Illawarra Mercury at Wollongong, a town of 800 people in 1855. There was no railway and communication with Sydney was mainly by sea. With an editorial motto of “Measures, not men”, the eight demy-page publication (with three columns per page) was produced on an Eagle hand-operated press and the initial circulation was 200.

Garrett said this would be costly but it would “furnish our subscribers with Sydney news, and the state of the markets, made up at half-past 4 on Saturday”. At the end of its first year, the Mercury appeared with “a fresh face and a new form”, adopting a double-demy sheet of six columns a page, and lengthening its title to become the Illawarra Mercury and Southern Coast Districts Advertiser.

Garrett took the opportunity to reflect on the uncertainties that had confronted him: “Twelve months since the Mercury took wing, elated with many hopes, depressed with few fears. Our flight since then, if it has neither been lofty nor swift, has not been erratic... Not only was our undertaking new to the district, but we were new to the duties and requirements of such an undertaking.”

From January 4, 1858 the Mercury appeared twice a week and on August 3, 1860, Garrett and his father, John established the Alpine Pioneer and Kiandra Advertiser as a bi-weekly at the
height of the gold fever in Kiandra. On December 11, 1860, Thomas Garrett was elected to represent Monaro in the Legislative Assembly. Son and father published the Kiandra paper until April 29, 1861, meanwhile establishing, at the behest of a Cooma syndicate, the *Monaro Mercury and Cooma Advertiser* on April 18, 1861.

There have been several long-term proprietors of the Mercury. The first was Archibald Campbell, who owned the paper in partnership with Joseph Hart from 1867-1883 and as sole proprietor from 1883-1903. The Musgrave family owned the paper from 1911-1955. Standish Richard Musgrave, an Irishman who had worked as a printer in Sydney, Grenfell, Cowra and Glen Innes, bought the *Illawarra Mercury* in 1911 and became the managing editor of Illawarra Newspapers Pty Ltd, which established the *Port Kembla Pilot*, and bought the *Bulli Times* and the *South Coast Herald*, Dapto. Son Wilfrid Musgrave was managing director of the Mercury from 1943-1955, selling to Rupert Henderson, the John Fairfax managing director who was building his personal newspaper portfolio.

Henderson sold the *Mercury* to the Fairfax group in 1969. John Fairfax Ltd’s acquisition in 1961 of a 45 per cent interest in Newcastle Newspapers Pty Ltd was the first step in an expansion program that encompassed Wollongong and Canberra by the end of the sixties.

In May 1964 Fairfax acquired the *Canberra Times* and in September 1969 it acquired the *Illawarra Mercury* from Henderson, no longer the Fairfax managing director, for $2.4 million. It was only with the gradual shift to Fairfax control that the *Mercury* adjusted its small newspaper outlook to take a much wider perspective. Henderson had installed John Richardson (1932-98) as executive editor in February 1968.

A former editor of the *Maitland Mercury* under the Packer regime of the early sixties, Richardson did wonders for Fairfax in running the *Canberra Courier*, introduced as a free weekly in June 1964, to help divert Canberra advertising away from *The Australian*. In Wollongong, Richardson restructured the *Mercury* over a decade, “turning it from an inward-looking local paper into an aggressive, community-minded paper prepared to take on major issues and provide a much wider coverage of national and international news”, according to Nigel Hartgerink, who became the editor in 1998.

Gay Mackie, supplements editor in 1995, said that when Richardson came, “instead of being a country paper, the *Mercury* suddenly burst into bloom as a much more important instrument – a newspaper that made people really sit up and take notice”. In Peter Newell’s words, Richardson “spearheaded a dramatic editorial change in the *Mercury* in the early seventies, adopting a big, bold tabloid style, going for his shots, and campaigning strongly on countless issues”.

Newell said Richardson had “earned the wrath of a former mayor Tony Bevan (an absolute badge of honour in light of more recent revelations) when he led a campaign to keep one of the city’s jewels – Gleniffer Brae – in public ownership after SCEGGS closed down”. Bevan had wanted to develop it. The site now houses a Conservatorium of Music, rolling lawns and a beautiful botanic garden open to all.

Richardson himself saw the defining moment in the development of the *Mercury* as being the coverage of the bushfires that hit Wollongong at the end of October 1968. Thirty homes were destroyed, hundreds more were damaged and thousands of people were evacuated. At the height of the crisis, the *Mercury* devoted nine pages to the fires. “Our coverage was much better than anyone else’s – we knocked the Sydney papers dead,” Richardson said in 1995. “That’s when the staff and readers realised the potential of the paper and its own people to do better than anyone else. It was the launch really of the paper we know today.”

The men who shaped the *Mercury* of today were Richardson’s men. “I think essentially the sentiments and philosophy have not changed a hell of a lot,” Peter Newell said. “The same people are basically running around and we’re all products of the same mould.” Richardson appointed David Lonsdale as editor in 1970 and appointed shortly afterwards two journalists who
would be future editors, Peter Newell and Peter Cullen. Lonsdale and Newell came from the Manning River Times, Taree, and Cullen from the Newcastle Sun.

Richardson had known Lonsdale and Cullen at the Maitland Mercury, and Lonsdale had appointed Newell as a cadet in Taree. Lonsdale edited the Illawarra Mercury until October 1976 when he left and Newell stepped into Lonsdale’s shoes as editor. He became executive editor in October 1978 when Fairfax headquarters sent Richardson to the Newcastle Sun on a “fix-it-or-kill-it” mission. At the end of 1985, Newell was appointed general manager of the Mercury and Cullen, editor.

The Mercury of the eighties and nineties was seen by some as a sensational rag, by others as a lively tabloid that knocked the socks off the Newcastle Herald. Stuart Littlemore, compere of ABC-TV’s Media Watch program, 1989-97, was accustomed to panning the Mercury. Newell regarded him as “a nightmare of a man [but] the best unpaid publicist we’ve got”. Both Newell and Cullen produced bold tabloid journalism sometimes reminiscent of the style of Sydney’s Daily Mirror in its heyday.

The Mercury’s front page of May 25, 1979, became a collector’s piece among Labor politicians. When the Mercury’s reporter, Richard Coleman, after attending his first Budget lockup in Canberra, rang the office to talk about the story, editor Newell interrupted to tell him that he already had his headline: “Lies, Lies, Lies!” – based on a quote from the Treasurer, John Howard, six months earlier. The mini-Budget had overturned several promises by the Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser. The circulation of the Mercury climbed from 12,988 in 1960 to 27,282 in 1970 and 36,534 in 1980 before stabilising and sliding slightly to 36,327 in 1990.

Peter Cullen (1939-2000) became best known for his long running campaign to expose paedophilia in the Wollongong community and in the local Catholic Church. In 1993 the Mercury first revealed the problem of widespread sexual abuse of young boys by exposing two paedophiles, Father Peter Comensoli and Brother Michael Evans. The Page 1 exposé was preceded by four months of investigation during which Mercury staff obtained statutory declarations from seven young men. Involved in the paedophile network, as revealed by the Wood Royal Commission into the NSW police, was a former Wollongong lord mayor and Independent NSW MP, Frank Arkell.

When Arkell was the victim of a gruesome murder on June 27, 1998, about 10 weeks before he was to have appeared in court on sex charges involving young males, the Mercury published with its next issue an eight-page wraparound, labelled “Arkell Murder Edition”. The Page 1 story, written by Cullen, described the appearance of Arkell’s body in detail: “His skull had been caved in, and a Rotary Club pin driven into one of his eyes. Tie pins were jammed into his cheeks.” Cullen linked the death to another murder a fortnight earlier and speculated that the two men might have been victims of “a vigilante killer”.

Beneath the macho exteriors of Richardson, Newell and Cullen, each had his soft spot for the down-and-outs and campaigned strongly for causes that touched the community’s heart. As Newell said of Richardson, “John did not suffer fools, but he did suffer poor souls who fell by the wayside simply through the hand they had been dealt in life. He picked up drunks and got them back on the wagon; he helped any number of journalists and others professionally and privately.” Gay Mackie said that behind the gruffness and grouchiness, Richardson was “really a pussycat”.

Cullen rated the Trudy Davis story as his own “story of a lifetime . .. the one story that warmed the soul and rated above the rest”. Trudy, aged 16, had a tumour on the brain, but it was skull-based and so complex that the best surgeon to perform it was based in Switzerland. Through Cullen’s story, the Mercury launched a public appeal that raised $100,000 to send Trudy to Switzerland for surgery. During the 13-hour operation – which was successful, although for the final few hours it was touch and go – Cullen was by the telephone at the Mercury. He became very depressed at the thought that Trudy might die because of the appeal he had launched. When Trudy’s father rang with good news, “I just cried like a kid”, Cullen later wrote.
In August 1999 the Fairfax-owned *Illawarra Mercury* closed its Wollongong presses and shifted its printing to the Fairfax plant at Chullora in Sydney’s south-west. Finished pages were sent by landline to the Fairfax computer centre in Sydney city and by microwave link to Chullora for output to film there. Advances in press technology had left the *Mercury* – a pioneer of daily newspaper colour in Australia – “unable to provide the levels of editorial and advertising colour it needs”, said general manager Peter Newell.

In 1998 Cullen retired as editor and handed the reins to 21-year *Mercury* veteran Nick Hartgerink – and a small badge for his key ring. The badge said: “No guts, no glory – go for it!” But the “guts-and-glory” days at the *Mercury* were coming to an end.

Cullen died on December 28, 2000, aged 61, after a heart attack, and Hartgerink’s career at the *Mercury* “died” in September 2001 when Brian Evans, as Fairfax’s regional newspapers general manager, replaced him with Peter Christopher, who was given the title of managing editor (*PANPA Bulletin*, October 2001). A year later Mitchell Murphy was appointed editor (*PANPA Bulletin*, October 2002). Six months ago Murphy was appointed group editor of Fairfax Community Newspapers, and Simon Dulhunty, editor of Albury’s *Border Mail* for four years, became the *Mercury’s* new editor in July. Christopher continues as general manager.

Many Illawarra residents work in Sydney or have moved from Sydney to the South Coast and so the *Mercury*’s main competitor is Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph*. On weekdays, the *Mercury* is generally 64 pages with a liftout, and on Saturdays it can be as big as 184 pages.

The *Mercury*’s circulation has declined from 36,327 for the first six months of 1990 to 30,999 in 2004 even though the population has been steadily increasing. Peter Christopher says the circulation in the primary sales area, from Helensburgh to Gerroa, has been strong in the past two years. He says any recent circulation declines have been in “secondary” circulation areas.

* Rod Kirkpatrick is Program Director, Journalism, in the School of Journalism and Communication, University of Queensland.