



## Rams, Wran and On-the-Run!

Which news subject won most play for a single story in March — Neville Wran, Donald Mackay or a flock of sheep in Western Australia?

If you picked the sheep, you're right.

Premier Wran won his fourth NSW election; the seven-year-old Mackay mystery came under intense national scrutiny at a Coroner's Inquest. But Mark Smith's story on the sex lives of sheep beat them hooves down.

A WA University researcher, prone perhaps to that condition peculiar to scientists and far-flung correspondents, spent three years studying sexually active sheep, often from a perch overlooking a paddock. His conclusion? Some ewes may simply lack sex appeal. The researcher found that rams expressed a clear preference for the unshorn "natural" look. Mark's account of the findings proved that the light touch at the right time can compete with the heavyweight stories of the day. His report, leading with: "Randy Rams Are Turned On by Woolly, Sexy-Looking Ewes", won extensive byline treatment in Australia and even more in New Zealand, where such matters clearly are taken even closer to heart.

The most bylined reporter of the month, though, was Sydney's Les Kennedy. Les flew to Griffith for the Mackay Inquest and followed it back home when it adjourned to Sydney. Almost daily there were exotic stories from the evidence before the Coroner: stories of a \$10,000 contract on the anti-drugs campaigner, of bodies in canals, truckloads of marijuana going missing from police custody and of "Aussie Bob" Trimbole at large on the French Riviera. Les sifted his way through it assiduously and his copy produced slabs of clippings from the metropolitans and provincials alike.

Few political observers expected another Wran slide to result from the 20-day NSW election campaign, the shortest in Australia's history. But neither did they contemplate a Labor defeat. As State political reporter Keith Gosman wrote in a bylined story in the West Australian on day one: "No-one in NSW political circles seriously entertains the belief that the Wran Government will lose."

## Hawke a Howard Fan.

If a week is a long time in politics, it can seem like an eon covering a cricket tour. Especially in an outpost like the West Indies where communications and accommodation problems often combine with long hours to make life exceedingly difficult.

All the more reason to applaud London staffer Howard Northey's equilibrium on the current Australian tour. Howard's entertaining views of life on and off the cricket fields of the Caribbean continue to score heavily in all States. Howard doubtless managed a wry smile on hearing one of his predecessors describe the \$20 airport departure tax from Georgetown, Guyana, as a "Bargain". He probably managed a broader grin to discover that he can count Bob Hawke among his readers, or so the PM confessed at a reception recently at the Lodge.

## Mind your Tongue.

Back in London, Ron Watson earned bylines for his UK budget

cover, Tony Benn's comeback and the degenerating standard of behaviour of "The Commoners" in the mother of parliaments.

Bureau Chief Ian Dick tapped the common touch to telling effect by having a few beers, all in the cause of journalism, at the Birdsville Pub — the one in Berlin, that is.

London casual Fiona Gillies deserved big displays simply for being ultra readable. She tackled the diversity of regional British dialects, and communicated with her readers as well as she did with the Scousers, Brummies and Geordies. As she explained in her feature, you'd almost have to be a Brighthouse greasy-percher to understand that the phrase: "Oowashiwi? Washiwithi or washiwihersen?" really means: "Was the lady with you or was she unaccompanied?" Not quite so difficult in the translation was the immortal piece of Yorkshire philosophy: "Eat all, sup all, pay nowt and if ivver tha does owt for nowt, do it for thassen".

Another to overcome the language barrier was Sydney's Diana Plater, who reviewed a dictionary of current prison vocabulary. If you only glanced at her story you'll know the lingo is called "Boobtalk" but you won't have an earthly about what it means to become a maggott by going on the dog for a four-bee.

Reporters hesitant about dipping a toe in the waters of personalised writing could have heeded an observation in an article by Sydney sports writer Joyce Thompson. Interviewing the Canberra Institute of Sport's resident "Psycho", Joyce noticed a slogan on his desk offering the advice: "If you're careful, nothing good or bad will ever happen to you."



# What's in a Name.

Sydney sports staffer Trevor Robb turned his hand to general news with instant results, getting a beat on a university study that trains with one-man crews are less safe. Trevor refuses to reveal the source for his advance report of the study, which was co-authored by a Doctor of Psychology with a strong physical resemblance called Tom Robb.

Brisbane's Mark Lever scored widely on the death of Kevin "Big Vinnie" Hooper and its calming effect on the raucous Queensland Parliament.

Mark and Jamie Collins combined in covering the State Liberal Party Convention, winning a joint byline in *The Australian* for their efforts.

For the Canberra bureau it was another one of those exceptionally productive months that have become the norm. The credits were too numerous to detail but included good showings on the prevailing topic, the so-called "Age Tapes". High Court reporter Bill Goff was bylined in *The Australian* on the legal fraternity's reaction to the naming of Justice Murphy. And the well-connected Peter Logue appeared on the front page of the *Canberra Times* after getting hold of the contents of a letter from Attorney-General Gareth Evans.

Jane Eyre made it on page one of *The Australian* for how much the bungled ASIS raid would cost the taxpayer, Bureau Chief Bruce Jones was bylined in the *Adelaide Advertiser* on the Vietnamese Foreign Minister's visit, and defence roundsman Colin Blair had a strong provincial run for his story on friendly nuclear-powered ships using Australian ports.

Mike Lawson also won good play covering the Prime Minister's trips to Tasmania and NSW, and Craig Skehan peppered the metropolitans from Vietnam, where he travelled with the Agent Orange Royal Commission.

Brian Johnstone was another reporter on the move, flying from Darwin to the Gulf of Carpentaria to witness the devastation caused by cyclone Kathy. Besides being one of the few journalists ever to

file under a Borroloola dateline, Brian can claim a front page lead (regrettably unattributed) in the *Melbourne Herald* and a page three lead, this one bylined, in the *Melbourne Sun* for his colour piece on the calm after the storm. Brian also established a new stringer in Alice Springs, David Richards, who bounded off the mark with consistently strong national coverage of the trial of the truck driver sentenced to life on five murder charges.

The courts provided Hobart correspondent Andrew Darby with his big story of the month — the "Mad Scientist" who cut his wife into 91 pieces, some of which he tried to flush down the toilet. Andrew's story on the verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity made a page one splash in the *Melbourne Sun* (unattributed) and was a big space-winner in other states.



Andrew Darby

Mark Smith won AAP a joint credit on *The Australian's* front page lead the day after the attempted "Magnet Letter" swindle at the Perth stock exchange. It was one of the longest days of Mark's career. In addition to his own cover, he spent many hours fielding a barrage of queries from other media and in helping investigations by the Fraud Squad and the National Companies and Securities Commission. A day that makes you feel like writing about sheep.

Melbourne finance writer Ian Pemberton's byline fronted the *Canberra Times* above the story of a massive BHP profit and industrial roundsman Ted Himmelreich was widely used for his national wage case round-ups.

# Chris-Crossing PNG.

The three AAP correspondents closest to home continued to carve their niche in the metropolitan dailies.

Chris Pash grew tired of waiting for the expected volcanic eruption at Rabaul and returned to his Port Moresby base, only to be on the move again before long. His trip to the border town of Vanimo to cover the revolt that went wrong paid handsome dividends. Chris won play right around the country for his reports of fighting between Indonesian troops and West Papuan rebels in Irian Jaya, and of hundreds of villagers fleeing across the border into Papua New Guinea. The continuing strain on relations between PNG and Indonesia caused by that incident and an alleged incursion into PNG air space by two Indonesian jet fighters was an overall story Chris kept bubbling along in tandem with Leigh Mackay, at the other end in Jakarta.

Leigh also figured prominently on the feature pages of the *West Australian* and the *Canberra Times* for an extensive, and rare, interview with the Governor of East Timor eight years after Indonesia annexed the territory.

John Coomber in Wellington showed that AAP correspondents never take holidays, they merely fade away from base. John was among a party of four AAP holiday-makers who toured New Zealand's North Island. So splendid was the hospitality afforded the group that John later wrote a travelogue, aptly titled "The Good Samaritans of Wairoa" by the World Desk. The story, featured in the *Canberra Times* among others, provided a heart-warming read for his colleagues and a boost to trans-Tasman relations, especially his observation that the New Zealanders are so naturally helpful that "they always look a bit puzzled when you thank them for their kindness".