

All Change in Overseas Posts

Three of our most successful overseas correspondents have recently changed hats.

Jane Eyre has left London to become News Editor in Melbourne, John Coomber succeeds her as Chief Correspondent in the UK, and Leigh Mackay has returned from Jakarta to become Financial Services Editor in Sydney.

Geoff Spencer has taken over from John in New Zealand and Jim Dallmeyer, Leigh's successor as South East Asian Correspondent, is now in Manila.

In the style that won them countless bylines around the country, Jane and John sum up their postings. Next Edition: Leigh Mackay.

Jane Eyre in London

"According to my list you come from Australia," His Lordship boomed, adjusting his hearing aid up a notch.

"Certainly do," I replied in the sweetest and quietest tones, since we had a considerable audience.

"Oh my gaawd," hollered he undeterred, "How teerrribly unfortunate for you."

He thought about it for a while and instead of allowing one to slide discreetly down in the chair in an attempt at low profiling, continued with: "It says you're the new AAP Bureau Chief."

Nodding was safer than speech.

"Good gaaawd, what's the world coming to, eh?"

Well, there is an answer to that, but not when it's your first formal function representing the company and the eavesdroppers on the conversation are more used to old school ties and the playing fields of Eton than women bureau chiefs.

The English are still a little conservative about these things.

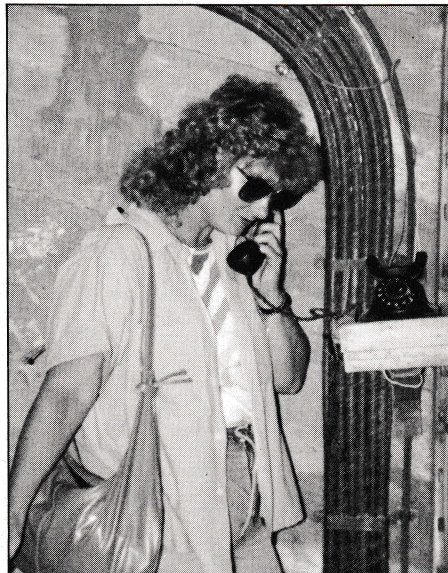
More an initial shock value than unyielding conservative sexism, an ongoing image problem

where dealing with women is concerned.

Unexpected perhaps in a nation with a woman Prime Minister, but alive and well nevertheless.

Women in business or the professions are supposed to look tweedy — all sensible lace-up shoes and scrubbed shiny faces, jolly hockey sticks Barbara Woodhouse types.

Relative youth, buttons undone below the chin and a split in the skirt can cause instant and often hilarious apoplexy.



Only phone in upper Egypt. In the temples at Abu Simbel, Hayden trip January 1984.

It has a remarkable effect on the male memory banks.

By a second meeting your name has become "sweetie," "honey," "darling" or "kid."

The greatest consolidating affectation for the female in such situations is the business card.

They rarely believe you until you hand one over and in black and white nestled under the company logo it says "Chief Correspondent."

It takes a Howard Northey — that noted exponent of rhyming slang — to perform a hilarious demolition job on months of patient, tolerant diplomacy.

He hit on the idea of naming yours truly "the pitch and toss" for boss.

Inevitably it came down to just "the pitch" and in the ways of journalistic bush telegraphs was adopted far and wide.

It did, however, have a shock value all its own when an English newcomer to the scene would chivalrously leap to my defence on hearing someone boom across the bar: "Ask the pitch what she wants to drink," and naturally mistaking the "P" for a "B".

"Do all Australian men speak to you like that?" they would mutter over their pinstripes, having just found out that you're supposed to be in charge.

The best course of action is to yell back across the bar: "The pitch wants a G and T".

Then you can turn to the new-found acquaintance and tell him in a conspiratorial whisper that Australian men are just quaint colonial types and have a warped sense of humour.

Therein lies another potential trauma — he sympathetically wants to know how you cope with this outrageous display of overt disrespect and sexism from your own colleagues.

The real talent involved is in trying to keep a straight face.

John Coomber in Wellington

Perusal of the AAP Wellington file in recent years may lead the reader to conclude that New Zealand is a land of sinking ships and diplomatic disturbances.

It is a partial truth, but the memories of New Zealand I will cherish in my dotage will be quite different.

The place is a treasure house of brights and briefs, and the network of fifty or so newspapers all filing through the co-operative system of NZPA ensures — as the French learned to their cost — that you can't turn around without someone noticing and reporting it.

From wonderful datelines like Taumaranui, Eketahuna and Nightcaps and such weighty journals as the Mautara Ensign, the Clutha Leader and Hokitika Guardian came a succession of unforgettable tales of the quirks and curiosities of New Zealand's three million souls.

Particularly memorable was the story of the man who shared his caravan with a pet pig called Barry and grew cannabis in a neighbouring field for their joint pleasures.

The magistrate was understandably sceptical of his claim that the crop was for personal use only — the local constables had uprooted more than 70 healthy specimens.

But he was forced to accept it when the policeman told the court: "That is correct, your honour. One smokes it and the other eats it."

Then there was the agricultural researcher who concluded that the daily flatulence output from a single sheep contained enough methane gas to drive an average farm utility 24 kms. (New Zealand has 70 million sheep).

And the woman who was fined for beating her neighbour senseless with the body of the pet cat he had drowned in a garden tub because he didn't like it rubbing against his legs.

Or the one who set fire to her husband's pigeon loft and threw the charred remains of his prize-winning birds at his feet... the man who waded into the surf and clubbed a shark to death with his

son's cricket bat because it was disturbing their game... the list goes on.

Wildlife stories were also to be savoured: the touching saga of Old Blue, the last fertile female Chatham Islands Black Robin who quite literally saved the species from extinction. Her death was announced in Parliament.

And the seldom-believed tales of adventurous Australian spiders spinning silken parachutes and hang-gliding across the Tasman on the prevailing westerlies. They were quite true, as any serious arachnologist will readily attest. The golden orb-weaver does indeed use a home made parachute to travel around, and it is not unknown for a spider to find herself being swept farther afield than anticipated.

On the political front the trend is similar. The big foreign policy issues are but occasional diversions from the true nature of the democratic process in the Shaky Isles.

In the closing days of my posting, I put my head around the gallery door to see what Parliament was up to.

The gallery benches were deserted. Down below, the green leather seats were mostly empty, save for the odd personalised sheepskin seat cover.

A few weary government members were gathered over a crossword, Sir Robert Muldoon sat comfortably on the opposition front bench, to which he had recently been promoted. A columnist's



John Coomber

recent description of his demeanour as one of a toad happily sunning himself on a rock was wickedly apt.

Over on the cross benches the business of the house was taking place. The two members of the declining NZ Democrats (formerly Social Credit Party) were taking it in turn to get into a lather over an obscure regulation dealing with funding for the Apple and Pear Board.

No one was taking the slightest notice, and it occurred to me that I was witnessing perhaps the most inconsequential legislative event in the entire Westminster system.

Lever on Drugs Trail

Mark Lever, no stranger to the international arena himself, won outstanding play in capital city newspapers when he was sent from Perth to Malaysia at short notice to cover the hangings of Kevin Barlow and Brian Chambers.

At the height of the story he had, for example, the front page lead in the Sydney Morning Herald on Saturday, and on the same day, the front page lead in the Canberra Times and a long front-page story with AAP credit in The Age.

He again led the Canberra Times on Sunday and Monday, had a three-column story on the front of The Age the same day, and bylines in the Financial Review on Friday and Monday.

Also on the Monday, the day of the hangings, he led the first edition of the Daily Mirror and The Sun in Sydney throughout the day. Radio and television stations also made extensive use of his copy.

In many ways there was a touch of *deja vu* about the assignment.

The appeals, the courtroom dramas and the vigils outside prison walls were all reminiscent of the Robert Trimbole extradition saga which Mark covered in Dublin last year.

Drugs boss Trimbole won his case and is now at large — and there the similarities ended.