2 The Tower

Don Cromie, back from Bowen Island, waited for the elevator in the lobby of the old Sun Tower in downtown Vancouver. And waited. And waited some more. The aging lift was legendary for slow motion. But the pause perhaps gave the publisher — once described by *Sun* columnist Jack Scott as "a restless man, all bone, sinew and nerve ends" — a moment to reflect on events of that summer of 1956.[1] Even as his newspaper's still-secret marriage with Southam's *Province* was being consummated, a bitter provincial election campaign was under way across British Columbia, and the government wanted Cromie in jail for the *Sun*'s coverage of it. The fact that a minister of the Crown was facing allegations of bribery had not stopped Premier W.A.C. Bennett from calling an election at summer's end. And though the scandal had caused forest minister Robert Sommers to resign his portfolio while an investigation was held, it had not prevented him from standing for re-election. Even before criminal charges could be laid, however, Sommers launched a preemptive strike, filing a libel lawsuit against lawyer David Sturdy, who had brought to light allegations the minister had accepted cash and gifts from applicants for timber-cutting rights.

When the matter became an issue in the election campaign, Cromie and Vancouver's other newspaper publishers were put in an awkward position. Reporting the brouhaha would risk a contempt charge, since the matter was now before the courts. But when Conservative leader Deane Finlayson raised the allegations in a campaign speech, reading portions of Sturdy's statement of defence aloud, the *Sun* ran the story, as

had the *Herald*. Now Sommers had gone to court seeking an order to put Finlayson, Cromie, and *Herald* publisher Gerry Brown in Burnaby's nearby Oakalla prison farm for contempt of court.[2] (The charges were thrown out after a Conservative Party lawyer from Saskatchewan, John Diefenbaker, who would be elected prime minister the next year, flew out to the coast to defend Finlayson.) The Sommers drama would last for more than two years, and the contempt charge against Cromie's newspaper would not be the last.[3]

A growing crowd was now waiting in the Sun Tower lobby for the snail-like elevator to arrive. The publisher greeted each employee personally, as he was on a first-name basis with most of his staff. "Cromie loves informality the way some men love order," a *Time* magazine profile a few years earlier had noted.[4] Pierre Berton described Cromie in *Maclean's* as "tall, willow-thin, probe-nosed, sandy-haired, nervous" and noted he had been voted the best-dressed man in the building. "He wears saddle-stitched, light-colored fedoras, tan corduroy suits, brilliant green-and-scarlet-flowered ties, loud sweaters and socks."[5] In *Saturday Night* magazine, Jack Scott called Cromie "fastidious . . . a stickler for punctuality," but observed that he "confronts the world with what is, for an intense man, a deceptively bland appearance and laconic style of speaking."[6] Despite being publisher of the city's leading daily, Cromie was, according to Scott, "a little known figure" in Vancouver, unlike his "ebullient" younger brother Sam, who served as the paper's representative at its free swimming and skiing lessons and annual salmon derby. "Something of an eccentric," wrote Scott, "[Don] Cromie is most often and accurately compared with his father. . . . Of four sons, Don alone seems to have been destined to voluntarily fill the publisher's chair."[7]

Don seemed to have inherited his father's business sense while the elder Cromie's charm and charisma went mostly to Sam. Together they made a good team, but Don had an unpredictability that was sometimes unnerving. "*Sun* men know that they can see him any time, [but] are not sure what will happen once they get inside his office," noted *Time* magazine in 1949.[8] In his 1948 *Maclean's* article, Berton told the story of how Cromie "once banged a hatchet down on the desk of O. Leigh Spencer, former *Province* publisher, during a get-together on ad rates, after he'd been told that Spencer carried a gun in his vest pocket."[9] His management skills often rubbed others the wrong way, but by the time his victory in Vancou-

ver's newspaper war was about to be acknowledged with a million-dollar dowry from Southam, Cromie was considerably more easygoing. "*Sun* department heads who have learned to live with his bluntness and sometimes caustic wit agree he is mellowing," noted Scott in his 1957 profile of Cromie in *Saturday Night*. "'Don has finally heard about the soft sell,' one observes."[10]

The copper-domed tower, where the growing contingent of *Sun* staff waited for the eventual elevator, had been built in 1911 in a warehouse district on the outskirts of what was then Vancouver's central business district, near the deepwater docks of Burrard Inlet, to house the city's leading newspaper of the day, which back then was not the *Sun* but the *Vancouver World*. The seventeen-storey World Tower, as it was then known, briefly held the distinction of being the tallest building in the British Empire, no small point of pride for a remote outpost on the edge of the Canadian frontier, before being surpassed by Toronto's twenty-storey Royal Bank building.[11] After Cromie's father bought the *World* in 1924 and folded it into his *Sun*, the World Tower was taken over by the Bekins moving company and used for storage while the *Sun* published from its old offices on the opposite side of Beatty Street. But after a 1937 fire razed the wooden *Sun* building, a move across the street again made the Tower a newspaper building, with neon piping added to the copper dome and a brilliant beacon installed on its roof to symbolize the shining *Sun*.

Robert Cromie was a legendary figure in Vancouver newspapering. A world traveler, promoting Vancouver wherever he went, he wrote pamphlets on the faraway places he visited, such as Russia and China. He was always bringing home interesting dinner guests, many of them visitors to Vancouver like the muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens, whom Don Cromie would remember later as "a tiny little fellow with a pointy beard and a black, sloping hat that gave him quite a dramatic appearance."[12] The senior Cromie also told his son of his long friendship with U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom he helped, during a visit to Washington, enunciate a rationale for his "New Deal" economic policy prescribed at the depths of the Depression of the 1930s. As Don recalled many years later in an oral history of Vancouver newspapers:

> It got great publicity across the country and was very heavily played in the *Sun* because my father asked the question at a news conference . . . [Roosevelt] proceeded to enunciate slowly ten points that set the objectives and goals of the New Deal, all of which had been written out by himself and my father the day before over tea. Nobody ever knew that.[13]

Despite having no formal education, the elder Cromie was a brilliant businessman. The story of how he came to the coast had long since passed into Vancouver newspaper folklore. Born in Quebec of Irish and Australian parents in 1887, he was working as a teenaged bellhop at Winnipeg's famous Mariaggi hotel about 1905 when he was summoned to bring ice and soda to the room of Colonel Jack Stewart, a visiting construction magnate from Vancouver. Given a sizeable tip, the young Cromie returned half of it, saying it was too much. Impressed with this integrity, Stewart hired Cromie as his personal assistant in Vancouver.

Stewart had emigrated from Scotland to Canada at 20 in 1882, working his way west to Vancouver, where he found employment as an axeman clearing the city site. He was working on June 13, 1886, when fire destroyed the fledgling town and he had survived the flames only by seeking refuge in the waters of False Creek.[14] The lucrative Pacific Great Eastern railway contract, which Stewart had obtained in 1909 along with his American partners, Timothy Foley and Pat Welch, would become one of the longest-running fiascos in B.C. history. Begun in 1912, construction of the line had stalled by 1916 two-thirds of the way from Vancouver to Fort George (soon to become Prince George), 400 miles away in the province's northern interior. The firm of Foley, Welch and Stewart, then the leading railway and heavy construction contractors on the continent, was unable to complete the project because of cost overruns and soon needed the provincial government's help to pay the interest on millions of dollars in loans. While the Colonel beat a hasty retreat to build rail lines across the battlefields of Europe during the First World War, his partners and assistant Cromie were left to explain what had become of the $25 million paid out for construction of the PGE. A select committee of the provincial legislature formed to investigate the scandal heard testimony that a half million dollars had gone to pay off a vice-president of the PGE to ensure the contract, issued without going to public tender, went to

Foley, Welch and Stewart. Skipping the country before his testimony was complete, the recipient confessed he used much of the money to pay off members of the Conservative provincial government and the press. A $1,000 payment went to editorial writer George Morden of the *North Shore Press* in return for his "ardent support" of the project, while $250 went to W.A. Harkin of the *Province*.[15]

Buying off the *Vancouver Sun* was quite unnecessary, Cromie testified in June 1917, as Stewart had used part of the $763,000 he distributed to members of the opposition Liberal Party to buy outright the evening newspaper, which was then a Liberal Party organ.[16] The PGE contract was canceled by motion of the provincial legislature, and a lawsuit was launched against Foley, Welch and Stewart, claiming $6.9 million in excess profits, which later was settled for $1.1 million.[17] A 1924 Royal Commission report eventually absolved the government of blame.[18]

As Don Cromie stood waiting for the elevator in the lobby of the Sun Tower in that summer of 1956, Bennett's Social Credit administration had just weeks earlier finally finished the PGE rail line to Prince George, forty-four years after it was started. The first train pulled into Prince George on August 29, which "Wacky" Bennett trumpeted to great effect in his campaign for re-election. Somehow in the confusion of the 1917 scandal around the PGE, which came to stand in the minds of many British Columbians for "Prince George Eventually," Robert Cromie came into ownership of the *Sun*. It was an acquisition that went unexplained for almost seventy years. "How the newspaper passed permanently into the possession of Mr. Cromie is another of the mysteries of Vancouver newspaperdom," declared a 1946 history of Vancouver newspapers by longtime *Province* editorial writer Dan McGregor.[19]

Regardless of how he acquired the *Sun*, Robert Cromie soon proved deft at advancing it. Borrowing money from Colonel C.B. Blethen, publisher of the nearby *Seattle Times*, he first bought the competing *News-Advertiser* in September 1917, paying only a reported $100,000 for it in a brilliant move, according to McGregor. "At one stroke, Mr. Cromie did two good pieces of business. He eliminated a rival . . . and he added that rival's circulation to his own."[20] To the *Sun*'s 10,000 readers were added the *News-Advertiser*'s 8,000, leaving it as the only morning newspaper, with the *Province* and the *World* publishing in the afternoon. In 1924, a year after Southam bought the *Province* from founder Walter Nichol, Cromie

bought the faltering *World* for $475,000 from owner Charles Campbell and began publishing it as the *Evening Sun* while continuing to publish a *Morning Sun*.

The only problem was that Cromie had neglected to extract a promise from Campbell to stay out of the Vancouver newspaper game, in which he emerged again as a player two months later, starting a new afternoon paper dubbed the *Evening Star*. More worrisome to Cromie in the renewed competition was the *Star*'s penny pricing, with six-day home delivery offered at thirty cents a month, compared with fifty cents for the *Evening Sun* and 75 cents for the *Province*. Cromie dropped his subscription price to 25 cents to undercut the *Star*, and Campbell quickly sold out to General Victor Odlum, a First World War hero who had been editor of the *World* in 1905 at age 25. Cromie made a series of deals with Odlum starting in 1926. First they agreed to stabilize monthly subscription rates at forty cents. Then Cromie made a bold move, persuading Odlum to swap the *Star* for his old *Morning Sun*. Thus, the *Star* was folded into the *Evening Sun*, and the *Morning Sun* became the *Morning Star*. Eyebrows were raised at the time, but the move proved a master stroke, as *Maclean's* magazine observed in 1928.

> What the public did not realize, and what Cromie apparently understood, was that . . . his evening paper, getting into the homes, had a far more promising future, from a revenue point of view, than the morning paper, which went to the offices and was consequently held in light regard by the advertisers bidding for the attention of women, who do the family buying.[21]

As proof of Cromie's foresight, the magazine cited the fact that *Sun* circulation had grown in four years from 17,000 to more than 70,000, noting "it is no secret that the big afternoon daily, evolved from the little sheet of dubious origin . . . is a highly prosperous concern."[22] The Cromie formula for editorial success was to make his locally owned newspaper a champion for Vancouver and Western Canada, while scorning his Southam competition and its absentee Eastern ownership. Stuart Keate, who as publisher of the *Sun* would take Cromie's paper to its greatest heights, remembered it from growing up in Vancouver during the 1930s as "the working-man's paper — at once raucous, rambunctious and dedicated to the proposition that the simple business of a newspaper was to raise hell. . . . It also espoused with the utmost vigour the curious enthusiasms of its

publisher." By comparison, according to Keate, the market-leading *Province* was "staid, stodgy and eminently respectable. . . . It viewed events with quiet objectivity, rarely raised its voice, and generally reflected the conservative stance of the Establishment."[23]

The *Star* folded in 1932 after its staff refused Odlum's demand to take a pay cut. *Time* magazine observed a few years later that "with two well-entrenched evening dailies in the field [population 246,593], a morning paper in Vancouver seemed an economic impossibility."[24] That did not stop a group of *Star* staffers from starting their own morning daily, the *News-Herald*. A public sympathetic to such a cooperative effort during the depths of the Depression helped the new paper grow within five years to a circulation of 20,000, making it the largest morning paper in the country west of Toronto.[25]

The elder Cromie's business acumen was doubtless due to his foresight, which also gained him a reputation for eccentricity. He was a fitness buff well before the jogging craze and a health-food devotee and vegetarian long before such a lifestyle was common. "He is a physical culturist of the first water," observed *Maclean's* in a 1928 profile. "An ordinary café, or club plate dinner, eaten by a friend, causes 'Bob' Cromie acute mental agony, for he can visualize in awful detail the calamitous chemical reactions of wrong food combinations. His friends describe his own meals as 'weird.'"[26]

The most-repeated Robert Cromie story is that of the editor who, on accepting his publisher's invitation to lunch, soon found himself embarked on a brisk ten-mile walk to Cromie's Point Grey home for a plate of raw vegetables. The irony was that Cromie, about whom *Maclean's* predicted "Canada is to hear a great deal," died at 48 of heart failure on May 11, 1936, while on a visit to Victoria for a speaking engagement before the Chamber of Commerce, where he was to recount his most recent trip to the Orient.[27] His funeral was the largest Vancouver had ever seen, and his will bequeathed half ownership of the *Sun* to his widow, Bernadette, born of a founding Vancouver family — the tinsmithing shop of her father, Edward McFeely, was one of the few buildings to survive the Great Fire of 1886 — and 10 percent to each of their five children. Mrs. Cromie took over as publisher in name only, with operations of the *Sun* directed by the paper's business manager, P.J. Salter. Eldest son Robert Cromie Jr. was named vice-president despite being just 24, but the combination was not successful, and the *Sun* went into a

period of decline. Bob Jr., as a staff member later recalled, "didn't like to make waves — he was just a nice guy."[28] The effect was that the editorial direction of the paper was set by accountant Salter, whose instinct was to emulate the successful *Province*, which made the *Sun* increasingly redundant to readers, and circulation fell.

Don Cromie, who was just twenty when his father died, had already dropped out of journalism school at the nearby University of Washington in Seattle. "I found myself messing around in type boxes — old fashioned type boxes — and doing things like that for which I had no aptitude," he remembered.[29] He switched his major to English but never finished his degree. Scott's 1957 profile in *Saturday Night* magazine summarized his life experience.

> He served an apprenticeship as a cub reporter on the *Sun*, rode the rods through the United States in one depression year on his father's advice that it would give him a liberal education, enrolled briefly in the London University's School of Economics, took a Cook's tour through Russia in 1936 and returned to complete his basic training on the news desk of the *Toronto Star*.[30]

Cromie had received his job offer directly from *Star* publisher Joseph Atkinson while taking a tour of the paper's building with circulation manager Ralph Cowan in 1940.[31] He was working in Toronto when his younger brother Sam, who objected to the way the *Sun* was being run into the ground, convinced Don to return home to help steer the family ship. With the war on, the physically robust Sam Cromie was about to be called up to serve in the RCAF, and from what he saw going on at the Sun Tower, he got the feeling the *Sun* would no longer be a Cromie family newspaper when he got out of the service. Don agreed to take over as managing editor, but with the strong-willed Sam away the *Sun* was almost sold out from under him. If it hadn't been for the intervention of sports editor Hal Straight, it would have been. Straight was a legend in Vancouver newspapering before leaving to take a job as publisher of the *Edmonton Bulletin*. "A reincarnation of Walter Burns, the hard-driving editor in . . . *The Front Page*," was the way Straight was described by Pierre Berton, whom he hired away from the *News-Herald* after being promoted to managing editor of the *Sun*. "He claimed he had spilled more hooch than most people consume in a lifetime."[32] A giant of a man who had been a notable amateur athlete in his youth, Straight was, according to Berton, "the perfect man-

aging editor for what was then one of the most colorful daily newspapers in Canada."[33] He was not above such stunts as putting apple-blossom perfume into the printer's ink for a feature on tree flowers, or convincing an itinerant evangelist to "walk through the composing room during a typographers' slowdown carrying a placard reading: 'It's Later Than You Think.'"[34] Straight secured his place in *Sun* legend when he abruptly settled a dispute with his city editor, who balked at following orders from a former sportswriter. The incident, according to Berton, set the town buzzing. "Straight simply picked him up and stuffed him into one of the big wire baskets behind the city desk."[35]

During the Second World War, Straight was still sports editor when Bob Cromie Jr. agreed, since the *Sun* had been losing money during the years since his father's death, with Salter's decision to sell the paper to Victor Sifton, owner of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, for $750,000. But Straight had made friends with an industry expert who had been brought in from Chicago to value the *Sun* for the buyers and who frequented the newspaper's sports department to get the baseball scores. The American confided to Straight that the *Sun* was actually worth more like a million dollars, and the sports editor passed the information on to Don Cromie, urging him to use the valuation to get the sale voted down at the shareholders meeting called to approve it. It did not happen that way, however, and the sale was approved. Straight recalled what happened next for a 1982 oral history of Vancouver newspapers.

> After the meeting, he [Don Cromie] came up to the sports department and I got mad at Don for not exposing the report. Finally, I arranged for him to phone his brother, Sam, who was in Edmonton in the air force, and have Sam phone his mother — she had the stock — that night, and Don would be there, and they'd ask her not to sell. So they did that.[36]

With the check already in the mail from Winnipeg, the sale was nixed.[37] Bob Cromie Jr. got out of the newspaper business and went into cattle ranching up-country. Salter quit, leaving Don to take over as publisher. Cromie offered Straight a promotion to city editor the next day at his home in West Vancouver, but Straight protested that his background was in sports and that he was inexperienced in the news business. Straight instead boldly asked for the managing editor's job Cromie had vacated, but the *Sun*'s new publisher balked. "How can you be managing editor

when you can't be a city editor?" he asked.[38] Straight had a quick answer, as recalled by Berton. "'Easy,' said Straight. 'I'll hire a good city editor.' He did — by luring Himie Koshevoy away from the *Province*."[39] A veteran journalist who began his career in 1932 on the old *Vancouver News* before it became hyphenated with the *Star* survivors as the *News-Herald*, Koshevoy was a brilliant acquisition for the Cromies because in addition to being a solid newsman, he possessed a flair for the offbeat that soon characterized the *Sun*. A persistent prankster, he once ran the same story on the front page three straight days, just to see if anyone would notice. Nobody did.[40] Stuart Keate, who worked on the *News-Herald* in the 1930s, described Koshevoy as "a gentle, gnome-like character who would have looked perfectly at home in a rock-garden, with water streaming from his mouth. He was also celebrated as the town's most avid punster. Why had he been kicked out of his campus fraternity? 'Because,' said Himie, deadpan, 'I refused to pay my Jews.'"[41] Together the enormous Straight and diminutive Koshevoy formed a Mutt-and-Jeff management team that would soon treat Vancouverites to some of the liveliest newspapering ever seen in Canada.

Things began looking up even more when Sam returned home after the war to run the production side of *Sun* operations as mechanical vice-president. The brothers became known as the "boy publishers," as Berton observed in his 1948 *Maclean's* article. "The name didn't stick. In . . . six years the *Sun*'s circulation has rocketed from 75,000 to 150,000. The Cromie boys have long since proved that they are dry behind the ears."[42] Don Cromie's first order of business after taking over as publisher was to remake the *Sun* into the type of feisty newspaper his father had produced. Under the guidance of Straight and Koshevoy, the editorial direction that had emulated the conservative coverage of the *Province* returned to the philosophy of Robert Cromie or, as Berton called it, "the *Sun* brand of raucous, racy, hard-hitting, ruggedly independent and highly irreverent journalism."[43] *Time* magazine listed in 1949 some of the changes by the *Sun*'s new publisher, who "hired some of the best reporters in town, remade the *Sun*'s hodge-podge front page, using clearer type and more pictures. . . . filled the first section of the paper with stories for men (including sports and finance), put women's pages, comics and classified ads into sections two and three."[44]

The ITU strike at the *Province* gave the Cromies the chance to take the lead on their competition, and they never looked back. The *Sun* empha-

sized local coverage, with the paper's sole correspondent outside B.C. being posted in the nation's capital of Ottawa. Its political stance was Liberal, laced with broadsides against absentee Eastern ownership and relentless criticism of federal monopolies in broadcasting (the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) and the airline industry (Trans-Canada Airlines, later renamed Air Canada). Like his father, who was known to slip his lead columnist a five-dollar bill to disagree with that day's editorial, Cromie encouraged his columnists to freely differ from the policies prescribed on the paper's editorial page. Two of the *Sun*'s most high-profile columnists were vigorously left-wing. Elmore Philpott even ran for parliament with Cromie's blessing.[45] Jack Scott's column often ran with a disclaimer or even a rebuttal from Cromie. A writer for *Saturday Night* magazine noted in 1953 the proliferation of columnists in the city, counting eighteen among the three dailies. Of the eight *Sun* columnists, it deemed Scott "an opinionated veteran . . . and a smooth writer," while Philpott was "probably the best-liked and respected of all the denizens of this bizarre journalistic jungle."[46] Berton observed the editorial battles at his alma mater with keen interest from his new posting in Toronto at *Maclean's*.

> Philpott and the editorial writers often snipe at each other from journalistic foxholes on opposite sides of the page. *Sun* readers have become used to picking up the paper to find an editorial attacking Scott, a feature story refuting Philpott, a Philpott column refuting a previous editorial attack and half a dozen letters to the editor violently denouncing or praising one and all.[47]

Scott observed in his 1957 profile of his publisher that Cromie was a "strong believer in retailing many shades of opinion," and noted he had even annoyed his reporting staff by slashing the news hole by an entire page to create space opposite the editorials to print opposing opinions.[48] According to Keate, Cromie became concerned in the mid-1950s about the length of *Sun* editorials and news stories and imported a New York word-count specialist to do a study. "The visiting semanticist recommended that no editorial should exceed 300 words, and no sentence nineteen words," Keate recalled.[49]

Cromie's formula was wildly successful, as *Sun* circulation soared from 160,000 in 1949, when it ranked as the country's fifth-largest daily, to more than 190,000 by 1954. The *Province*, after dropping below 100,000 in cir-

culation for the five years after its disastrous strike, was by then back up over 120,000 as a result of its increasingly vigorous promotional efforts.[50] Competition between the two evening papers had turned into an all-out war and created a climate for newspapering that reminded many, including Berton, of "the rough-and-ready, buccaneering brand of journalism that made Chicago famous in the '20's."[51] *Maclean's* columnist George Bain recalled the formula as "Bright writing, big headlines and outrageous stunts. . . . at *The Sun*, when the story was big, they played it big. With big headlines, bylines and plenty of space."[52] The secret to the *Sun*'s success, Scott noted in 1957, was that "the front-running position in circulation made little change in the *Sun*'s long-time 'second-newspaper look' of aggressive news coverage with an emphasis on local stories, a stable of controversy-hungry columnists and globe-trotting feature writers."[53]

But Cromie had one problem that prevented him from running away from his evening rival. Berton's many talents included cartooning, which he had done at the *News-Herald* before the war, and song-writing.[54] He immortalized Cromie's quest for the scarce newsprint on which to print more and thicker copies of the *Sun* after the ITU strike, in a composition for quartet performed at an annual soiree known as the "Fourth Estate Frolic," which was held at the Hotel Vancouver.

> *Cromie wanted paper like Dracula wanted blood*
> *He really had to have the stuff to stem the* Province *flood*
> *He used up every ounce he had to stretch each daily issue*
> *And that is why our men's room has clear run out of tissue.*[55]

By 1951, with newsprint still in short supply, Cromie was about to go into the black market and pay exorbitant prices to a commodities broker in New York when he lunched with his old friend Slim Delbridge, a stock promoter who had taken over the morning *News-Herald* a few years earlier with a group of investors. The ever-interested Keate, then publisher of the nearby *Victoria Times*, recounted in his memoirs the deal they made.

> The *News-Herald* quota, while not large, was significant when valued at the price Cromie intended to pay for paper in New York. Before the luncheon was ended, Delbridge had agreed to sell the *News-Herald* to the *Sun*. . . . Cromie got the morning newspaper and its quota for no more than he would have been compelled to pay for newsprint in New York.[56]

Over Delbridge's protests, Cromie proceeded to starve the morning paper for its precious newsprint, which he used to pad his lead over the *Province*. The *News-Herald* was down to a thin ten-page edition, of which only 30,000 copies were being printed daily, when Cromie flipped the ailing title to Roy Thomson in 1952.[57] Thomson's expanding international media empire had started with a chain of smaller newspapers across Canada, but most were moneymakers due to the fact they enjoyed local monopolies. Thomson soon found the fierce competition in Vancouver not to his liking and tried repeatedly to unload his renamed *Herald* on both Southam and the *Sun*.

For Cromie, making peace with Southam made a lot of sense. Newspapers had become big business, and independent, family-owned dailies like his were becoming an endangered species. Chains like Southam and Thomson were expanding and reaping the advantages of scale economies, which allowed them to reduce costs through centralized management. The chains were also better-equipped through diversification to weather the bad times that could put individual newspapers out of business. It was a conundrum that while daily newspaper circulation soared to record levels in the mid-1950s, the cost squeeze was killing long-established titles at a rapid rate. In a three-year period in the 1950s, no fewer than four Montreal dailies suspended publication, including the 146-year-old *Herald*, which had been acquired by the rival *Star* in 1938 and converted to the country's lone English-language tabloid, modeled after the successful *New York Daily News*.[58]

As he finally boarded the arriving elevator, Cromie was also no doubt mindful of the fact that in Edmonton, where Straight had gone for a job as publisher of the venerable *Bulletin*, that paper's death in 1951 was the result of its being *too* successful, as the Canadian Press wire service had reported.

> The newspaper had increased its circulation 66 per cent in three years and its advertising linage 88 per cent. He [Straight] said it was now confronted with the problem of building a new plant and buying a new press at an outlay of $1,000,000. In addition, the paper was unable to obtain adequate newsprint supplies.[59]

The *Bulletin* was the second-oldest newspaper in Western Canada, after the *Battleford Herald* in neighboring Saskatchewan. It would have beaten the Battleford paper to publication, but its first printing press,

transported by founder Frank Oliver from Winnipeg in an ox cart, ended up at the bottom of the Saskatchewan River when the raft Oliver built to cross the river tipped. Oliver had to return to Winnipeg and order a new press from Philadelphia.[60] But the press was designed for a sixteen-page paper, and the *Bulletin* had increased in size to an average of twenty-seven pages per edition and 30,000 circulation under the aggressive ownership of *Calgary Albertan* publisher and oil magnate Max Bell, who had bought the newspaper in 1948. Its competition, Southam's *Edmonton Journal*, sold almost twice as many copies in the provincial capital of 150,000. In announcing its demise, the *Bulletin* noted the growing problem on its front page. "Many newspapers have been forced out of business in centres of population much larger than Edmonton and the trend is that the number of cities able to support more than one newspaper is steadily decreasing."[61] Straight told his old colleagues at the Sun Tower "we forced ourselves out of business," but denied he was heading to Victoria to take over as publisher of the *Victoria Times*, which Bell had just bought in the British Columbia capital.[62]

Finally back in his fourth-floor office, Cromie took a long-distance telephone call from Toronto. It was St. Clair Balfour calling from Southam headquarters with an interesting proposition to settle the question of how much compensation Cromie and his *Sun* would receive for agreeing to an equal partnership with the smaller *Province*. Cromie had been holding out for $4 million up front, with Southam stuck on its offer of $3.5 million. Balfour was obviously a gambling man, because he offered to flip a coin to decide the amount, and was even willing to let Cromie perform the toss right there in his Vancouver office. The Southam man had a sense of daring, having previously won a similar flip with Jack Kent Cooke over a $50,000 difference in the sale price of a printing company in Toronto.[63] Cromie, however, was unwilling to risk such a large sum on mere chance. "I was a gambling man, but half-a-million was a bit too rich for my blood, and I balked," he told Ben Metcalfe in a 1986 interview. "I think even Nick the Greek would have balked at a phone toss for half-a-million."[64]