



adlib
Denny Boyd

Lament for a Daily

Why The Sun no longer sets in the west

I still buy the *Vancouver Sun* and I still read it. It's a rooted habit. I spent so many years there at my little bench, cobbling sentences for its pages, that I can't entirely break away. It's not that I uncritically enjoy the current rendition of the paper that has had more owners than a runaway dog. I don't. I find a criminal docket of faults with it. The foremost would be:

1. It still answers to out-of-province owners and is required to run one-bias-fits-all corporate editorials ground out by a CanWest Global sausage machine.
2. It is as dour as a Presbyterian funeral.
3. I'm not in it.

It is ironic that the *Sun* has fallen into grievous habits because for a quarter of a century it has never had a design or a boss long enough to become habitual. In this magazine in 1999 I griped, "Every four or five years, a new editor-in-chief/publisher is recruited from the East, arrives here not knowing the territory or readership and re-casts the paper in his own image." It remains so but it was not ever thus.

When I joined the swaggeringly independent *Sun* in 1957, it was owned by Don Cromie; maintaining a local tradition begun in 1917 by his father, Bob. The workingman's paper reflected the character of the city, impudent, loudmouthed, cocky and shrill.

Profits were fat and in 1957 Cromie was persuaded that they could be doubled if production costs were reduced through a joint operating contract with the Southam-owned *Province*. The deal was a blatant example of monopoly creation. He and

Southam formed Pacific Press, two papers under one roof with no competition.

Cromie was given \$3.8 million in Southam cash as a dowry and was regarded as a business genius. But he had a large, impatient extended family that wanted cash, not quality journalism and, on a bad day in 1963, he accepted an irresistible offer from Calgary Max Bell of FP Publications for his half of Pacific Press.

Cromie sold and was retained as publisher in name but not in fact. His salary was cut from \$85,000 to \$35,000, his decisions were ignored and he was barraged with blistering memos from FP headquarters. Six months later, stripped of power and respect, he resigned.

Bell brought Vancouver-born Stuart Keate in to run the *Sun*.

Here it gets personal. The day Keate came to the *Sun* he called and asked me upstairs; I had to ask where it was, never having been invited by Cromie. He greeted me warmly and said, "Let's sit over here and put our feet up on Cromie's table." Two days later he made me a columnist.

For a more objective appraisal you must read *Pacific Press*, a brilliantly researched history of the company, by former *Province* courthouse reporter Marc Edge. I love the book for three reasons:

1. Edge has a PhD in mass communications, so he knows the journalism part of the story.
2. He has a masters in labor relations so can analyze the poisonous union problems that caused seven strikes in 10 years.
3. I'm in it.

Keate led the paper for 15 brilliant years, but he had a serious flaw that I was not aware of until Edge's book.

The *Sun's* brightest ray during Keate's watch was Allan Fotheringham, a small-town prairie boy who nevertheless sprang full-formed as a journalist when he came to the *Sun* from UBC at Keate's invitation.

Keate nursed him carefully, encouraging him to diversify into other media, putting up with his libel suits (three in one unforgettable week). He suffered Fotheringham's raucous print feud with Doug Collins who, contrasted with Fotheringham's surgical strikes, threw words around like bricks in a street fight.

We all assumed Foth was a cinch to be the next publisher. But when the time came, Keate could not let go completely and,



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according to Edge's examination of the publisher's letters, systematically disqualified all the logical contenders. Fotheringham was "no administrator", editorialist Paul St. Pierre had "a prickly personality", assistant publisher Bruce Rudd "lacked experience", senior editor Dave Ablett had "turned sour."

With no anointment within, senior brass went east, recruiting Clark Davey from *The Globe and Mail*, the first outsider ever to run the paper. He was introduced to *Sun* staff the day Keate left. In character, the unions went on an eight-month strike the following day.

That was it, then, the end of recognizable owners, the end of local pride, the end of any compelling reason to call it the '*Vancouver Sun*'. And, frankly my dears, I don't give a damn. ■