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## How a communist rag in Darwin became a newspaper for Mount Isa

By Rod Kirkpatrick

Mount Isa, a day's drive from Townsville and three days' drive from Brisbane, is a mining centre with a highly mobile population. Comparatively few people stay there more than five years. Young adults eager to make a start in their trades, businesses or professions are drawn there. Miners, of course, are the highest paid workers in town.

Teachers, nurses, doctors and police officers are part of the passing parade. One by-product of the young, itinerant population is that Mount Isa Base Hospital, has a high birth rate. It boasts on billboards around town that it's "The Birthplace of Champions", for among those born there have been golfer Greg Norman, tennis player Pat Rafter and footballer Simon Black.

All endure the heat, dust and flies until many of them return to the coast or somewhere cooler. One continuing presence for more than half a century has been Mount Isa Mines, now owned by Xstrata. Mount Isa is the site of the largest underground mine in Australia, and is the backbone of Queensland's booming mining industry. Lead, zinc, silver and copper are the main metals produced at the Isa.

Another continuing presence in Mount Isa has been the *North West Star*, which will be 40 years old next year, but there were two earlier Mount Isa newspapers, and before that a string of Cloncurry newspapers tried to cover the wider district.

The first newspaper for Cloncurry, an hour's drive to the east of Mount Isa, was the *Cloncurry Advocate and Flinders Pastoral and Mining Register*, established in 1889. In later years, the *Advocate* had competition at various times: from the *Mining News* for a few years at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the *Western Mail* from about 1915-18, and the *Cloncurry News and Mount Isa Record* from 1921 until January 29, 1933.

The first newspaper specifically directed at a Mount Isa readership was the *Mount Isa Standard*, printed in Brisbane at the Coronation Printery. H.B. Waldegrave published this weekly paper from January 22, 1948, until August 19, 1949.

Meanwhile the *Cloncurry Advocate* struggled on. When a Canberra-based partnership, led by political journalist Bertram Lindon (Don) Whittington, bought that paper in 1953, he recalled Cloncurry as a ghost town, consisting of pubs patronised by ringers from the surrounding stations. "The *Advocate* was housed in a tumbledown tin shed. It had a small flatbed press and a couple of gas-fired Linotypes, the cold metal for which had to be melted down each day in a wood-fuelled copper in the back yard," he wrote.

"The climate was so hot and dry that the flat sheets of paper would not separate because of static electricity in the air. This could be countered only by regularly spilling the contents of a watering can on the floor around the press."

Don Whittington and Eric White, who in the years ahead would establish the biggest public relations firm in Australia, formed in 1947 a loose partnership that gave them the flexibility to pursue their own interests, but to combine when those interests merged. The partnership's first enterprise was the weekly political newsletter, *Inside Canberra*, launched on January 15, 1948, but within five years Whittington and White had started a newspaper in Darwin and another in Mount Isa.

By the 1940s Darwin was served by only one newspaper: the *Northern Standard*, which incorporated the *North Australian* and the *Northern Territory Times*, established in 1872. But the *Standard*, launched on February 19, 1921, by the North Australian Workers Union, served as both general newspaper and trade union journal.

As early as 1941 the Department of Information, established by the Federal Government early in World War II, suggested a newspaper be established in opposition to the *Northern Standard* because of that paper's "communist nature". One government letter

described the content of the *Standard* as “subversive” and “treasonable” and as something that “cannot fail to have a serious effect on the loyalty and morale of the population”.

The 1941 plan was abandoned, but in 1949, the Chifley Labor government held discussions through the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Dr John Burton, with Whittington. “The government, [Burton] said, was impressed by the non-partisan attitudes of *Inside Canberra* and was prepared to give me some covert assistance, without seeking or expecting anything in return, if I was interested in launching a newspaper in Darwin,” Whittington wrote.

To him, the idea seemed preposterous. His newsletter was little more than a year old and was paying little more than “starvation wages”. He had started another two associated newsletters. The logistics of producing a newspaper in distant and war-ravaged Darwin were “appalling”. “No one in his right senses would even consider it. I told Burton I would.”

Eric White, who had been foundation publicity director of the Liberal Party, 1944-47, before leaving to establish his own public-relations firm, was totally opposed to the Darwin plan. He knew nothing of newspapers or how they were produced, and was not even interested in controlling a newspaper. But he agreed that Whittington should pursue this improbable dream.

The partnership asked the government for cheap freight and access to the existing *Standard* printing equipment if the union paper was banned under a proposed Bill banning the Communist Party. The Chifley government rejected these conditions, but some concessions were granted two years later by the Menzies Liberal Government, mainly in terms of travel by the government-owned airline and in accommodation for the newspaper.

The *Standard* was not banned, but after the change of government, Whittington, with White’s help, launched the *Northern Territory News* – on February 8, 1952. Others in the partnership were printer John Coleman, who contributed his press and so was allocated £1,000 (\$2,000) in shares, and some small local investors, including various Darwin-based Chinese businessmen.

Whittington said no newspaper had been launched in more unlikely circumstances: “Inspired by a senior public servant who was virtually exiled from Australia after a change of government, financed largely by Chinese, and produced in a ramshackle tin shed in territory in Darwin reserved at that time exclusively for the Royal Australian Navy, it was an immediate success, due largely to the death in England of King George VI.”

The King’s death was propitious for the *NT News*, which did not have anything strong for Page 1 in its first issue. Even though the paper lacked a cable service, it drew the basic information on the King’s death from ABC radio newscasts and padded that with background information. The *Northern Standard* struggled on for two years after the advent of the *News* and closed on February 10, 1955.

Whittington had recruited a Warrnambool journalist, Mac Jeffers, as editor. White, the man who was so cold initially on starting a newspaper in Darwin, soon proposed the partnership start a newspaper in Mount Isa. He became “sold on the idea” after discussing it with the MIM chairman, George Fisher. White’s firm was giving public relations advice to MIM.

Fisher promised friendly cooperation, but “declined to subscribe capital and could influence very little advertising because, in fact, there was not very much to influence”. Whittington was never optimistic the Mount Isa venture would succeed, but to help it along the firm bought “a little rundown paper”, the *Cloncurry Advocate*, a month after launching the *Mount Isa Mail* on June 26, 1953.

The *Mail* was printed on the *NT News* press twice a week and the papers were flown to the Isa. Jeffers was transferred from Darwin to Mount Isa as editor and Jim Bowditch was installed as editor of the *NT News*, the best thing that could have happened to that paper.

Whittington and White closed the *Cloncurry Advocate* on December 1, 1953, and incorporated it in the bi-weekly *Mount Isa Mail*. The printing of the *Mail* was shifted from Darwin to Mount Isa from March 1, 1955, and publication reverted to weekly from July 7, 1955. The *Mail* presses were in Gardenia Street in the Coal Stage area close to the MIM main gate. Many of the *Mail*’s customers were MIM employees.

At the end of the 1950s, the Whittington-White partnership did a deal with Rupert Murdoch, described by William Shawcross in his biography of Rupert Murdoch. “The purchase of the *Northern Territory News* in Darwin was typical of the way Murdoch did business... Murdoch zigzagged his way up the country by DC-3. He bounced into town and haggled for the *Northern Territory News* with the owner, Sir Eric White, who recalled later that they had quite a night of it.”

The deal – which included the *Mount Isa Mail* – was clinched early the next morning on the runway at Darwin airport. The sale of the *NT News* to News Limited was announced in that paper on February 19, 1960. In 1959 Murdoch, who had not even obtained a foothold in the Sydney newspaper market yet, had put the cat among the pigeons in Darwin by announcing on a visit there that he planned to launch a tri-weekly newspaper there.

After he had taken control of the *NT News*, he upgraded the printing equipment and made the paper a tri-weekly before 1960 was out; he also made the *Mount Isa Mail* a bi-weekly in October 1960. In 1964, Murdoch took full control of the *NT News* and the *Mount Isa Mail*. He made the *NT News* an afternoon daily on February 10 that year and the *Mail* an afternoon daily from November 22, 1965.

By the early 1960s, Eric White was no longer the public-relations consultant to MIM. Asher Joel now filled that role. Joel developed a close relationship with MIM general manager, Jim Foots. They were not impressed with the *Mount Isa Mail*, and so Joel decided he would start an opposition newspaper.

He established Carpentaria Newspapers Pty Ltd and launched the *North-West Star*, on May 12, 1966, as a morning daily. Joel grew up as the eldest son of an impoverished Jewish family in inner-city Enmore, Sydney, but was knighted twice by the Queen for distinguished services to the community.

He organised Royal visits, a papal visit, Sydney’s annual Waratah Spring Festival, Australia’s 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 1963 and the Captain Cook Bicentenary Celebrations in 1970. He provided his services in these roles without charge.

At the *Daily Telegraph*, Joel went from messenger boy to copyboy and soon won the journalism cadetship initially denied him because he lacked even an Intermediate Certificate. By turn, he became a journalist, a naval officer, a public relations officer who launched his own agency, a member of the New South Wales Upper House (1957-78) and a newspaper and television-station owner.

The *North West Star* said its policy was clear-cut and decisive: “the welfare of the men, women and children who have accepted the challenge of the rugged outback to help build new cities and towns, develop new industries and to win for themselves their own particular place in the sun in this vast land of mineral and rural resources”.

Kelvin James Fairbairn (b. 1931), who had been working in Joel’s Sydney office for 11 years, was sent to Mount Isa to help start the paper. Within two months he was the general manager and filled that role until he retired on November 30, 1995.

The *Star*’s first editor was Bill Moloney who had worked as a printer and journalist in city and country NSW. At the *North West Star*, he was initially the managing editor, but left soon after Joel had made it clear that he was happier with Fairbairn in the supreme role.

Two months after the *North-West Star* began publication, News Ltd closed the *Mount Isa Mail* – on July 8, 1966 – after an agreement to “rationalise news services in Mount Isa and adjoining areas”. It sounds as though Murdoch shared Whittington’s pessimistic view of the *Mail*’s prospects and, like Whittington, was glad to cut his ties with it.

At the *Star* today are two long-serving executives, general manager Jim Nichols and editor Liz Corbett. Nichols has been the general manager for seven years and Corbett has been the editor for 14 years and has been at the paper for 25 years.

Nichols grew up at Moama, NSW, and started in journalism as a cadet across the Murray at the *Riverine Herald*, Echuca, and has since worked on newspapers at Bendigo, Shepparton, Mackay, Charters Towers, Townsville and numerous other northern centres, often in a managerial or senior editorial capacity. He has also run his own public-relations business and organise major sporting events such as regional games and the Mount Isa Rodeo.

Liz Corbett, a native of Auckland, had not worked as a journalist before she arrived in Mount Isa in January 1979. She answered an advertisement for a social reporter on the *Star*, and she got the job. She wrote about social events, compiled a column called "Town Talk", did filing and "made the tea – in the days when women made tea".

She gradually moved into areas of general reporting and later into sub-editing. She replaced Jerry Carroll as editor when he left in May 1991, after seven years in the chair. Carroll's predecessor was Terry Sweetman, editor, 1969-84, now a *Sunday Mail* and *Courier-Mail* columnist.

Carpentaria Newspapers publishes the daily *Star*, which is still owned by the Joel family and is the only independent daily in Queensland, as well as a monthly rural publication, *NW Country*, the quarterly *Inland Queensland Tourist Guide* and a monthly mining publication. The company also prints the weekly *Longreach Leader*, owned by a Longreach syndicate, the *Alice Springs News* and the *Tennant and District Times*, Tennant Creek.

Carpentaria Newspapers normally employs 31 full-time staff, including nine in editorial, along with five part-time staff and a small, fluctuating group of casuals. Circulation of the *North West Star* for the final half of 2004 was 3,611 compared with 4,150 five years earlier.

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