

# The regional daily unafraid to stand alone

By Rod Kirkpatrick

The *Sunraysia Daily*, Mildura, is the last-remaining broadsheet regional daily newspaper in Australia, but being the last does not worry the paper because it has never been ‘one of the crowd’. Its conception (inspired by the desire to promote the fruit-growing industry in the irrigation areas of north-western Victoria) and birth (resulting from the amalgamation of three newspapers) were distinctive and it has lived a life where it has never really fitted easily into the mould of conventional regional dailies. This paper will explore the distinctive identity of a newspaper that became the foundation for one of the more unusual provincial press groupings in Australia; and it will profile the founding proprietor of the group who rescued the daily newspaper and used it, and the other papers in the group he amassed, as an outlet for his political views, even when he was elected to the Senate.

An unusual experiment in daily newspaper publication was projected at Mildura in north-western Victoria in 1920. Four small newspapers were invited to join forces to create a new daily paper to serve the Murray River irrigation districts of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. Three of the four accepted the invitation; the one that rejected it was the highly esteemed South Australian weekly, the *Murray Pioneer*, published at Renmark. One of the three papers that said ‘yes’ was the *Mildura Cultivator*, established on 19 May 1888<sup>1</sup> when settlement was barely nine months old in the ‘Mildura colony’, described earlier by a Melbourne paper as a ‘Sahara of hissing hot winds and red driving sand, a carrion-polluted wilderness’. But Mildura had become a central part of the irrigation colonies that were being established in Victoria and South Australia by the Canadian-born brothers George and William Benjamin Chaffey, who had initiated successful irrigation settlements in California.<sup>2</sup> The second paper to join the Sunraysia project was the *Mildura Telegraph and Darling and Lower Murray Advocate*, which an itinerant newspaperman, Henry Alfred Furze, had launched as a bi-weekly on 9 May 1913.<sup>3</sup> The third was the weekly *Merbein Irrigationist*, launched on 5 November 1919 by Furze’s son, Henry John Dysart Furze. It was printed at the Furze family’s *Telegraph* office in Mildura.<sup>4</sup> Mildura’s *Cultivator* and *Telegraph* and Merbein’s *Irrigationist* ceased publication at the end of September 1920, combining their interests to help launch the *Sunraysia Daily*, then and now the most distant Victorian daily from Melbourne.<sup>5</sup> (Its closest daily cousin is the *Barrier Daily Truth* at Broken Hill, NSW.) This distance has helped the *Sunraysia Daily* create and maintain differences from the general pattern of Victorian dailies, and has even helped shape the distinctive newspaper group that grew up around it.

## Eccentric entrepreneur the driving force

The driving force behind the launch of a daily for Mildura was Clement John De Garis, described as ‘among the most eccentric and exotic entrepreneurs of the 1920s’. C.J., also known as Jack, was a pioneering aviator, an author, a playwright, a patron of the arts and an innovator in advertising. He had successfully launched a brilliant advertising scheme for the Australian Dried Fruits Association.<sup>6</sup> He organised and personally conducted a press tour of the river settlements by more than fifty representatives of Australian newspapers. During this tour, someone suggested that Mildura should have a daily newspaper. De Garis ran with the idea and sought the cooperation of local newspaper proprietors.<sup>7</sup> Four trial issues of the

daily were published before the managing editor, Harry J. Stephens, was satisfied that official publication should begin.<sup>8</sup> On Saturday, 16 October 1920, he proclaimed in the broadsheet daily:

This is the 'real Number One', the first regular numbered issue of the *Sunraysia Daily*. Produced with untried machinery by a staff far short of adequacy, it has many shortcomings, but none remediable, and none (it may be promised) that will not be remedied in the next few weeks. The one outstanding 'if' of the situation is the postal department, for not until the long distance telephone line is duplicated, and probably not until the telegraph system is also strengthened, can *Sunraysia Daily* be as good as its promoters intend.<sup>9</sup>

The name 'Sunraysia' came from a contest that De Garis had held to find the best name to describe the dried fruits grown in the Mildura district. The winning name was 'Sunrayseed' (i.e., sun-raised) and it was a short step from there to describe the district where such fruit was grown as 'Sunraysia' and so the daily newspaper serving that district became the *Sunraysia Daily*.<sup>10</sup>

The early issues of the newspaper carried a panel that set out the basic editorial policy under five headings: the development of Sunraysia (advancing the material interests of the Murray districts); the success of repatriation (friendly interest in Australia's returned soldiers, and especially their settlement on the land); the progress of the settlement (creation of an even stronger opinion in favour of water conservation and irrigation); the onward march of Australia (advocacy of every activity design to increase Australia's population and production); and the maintenance of peace (recognition of Australia's rights and duties as a member of the British Empire). A photographer and an artist were appointed and an etching and block-making plant was installed. De Garis's own aircraft was used to deliver copies of the newspaper to Renmark, down river in South Australia. The cover price of the *Daily* was 1½d (one and a half pence), a common price for dailies at the time.<sup>11</sup>

### **Boosterism emphasised**

In those enthusiastic early months, promotion outdid news in the *Sunraysia Daily*. Its focus was boosterism, in the best traditions of American papers chasing settlement and prosperity for their town. Every issue presented positive feature articles on Sunraysia: its institutions, such as Wentworth Hospital; its industries, such as old-world dried fruit growing; its railway services, such as 'Ouyen, a railway-made town'; its sons, such as Edmund Semmens and his work for Mildura, and Harry Morant, the wild life and tragic end of 'The Breaker'; and its dreamers – a series based on what people dreamed of for the district, such as a widely-travelled woman's suggestion for a hostel for business girls.<sup>12</sup>

De Garis made a bitter opponent for the *Daily* when he exposed as a fraud a visiting verse writer and journalist, George Cochrane alias Grant Hervey, who was seeking money to float a scheme to make greater Mildura the capital of the Murray Valley – which he envisaged as a separate State. Cochrane, born at Casterton, Victoria, had been jailed for attempting to sell Sydney proprietor Ezra Norton information relating to an affair Cochrane claimed to have had with Norton's wife.<sup>13</sup> In Mildura, Cochrane, as Hervey, developed a connection with a small weekly paper, the *Mildura & Merbein Sun*, which began publication on 8 January 1921.<sup>14</sup> Hervey edited the paper from July and derided the *Daily* constantly, threatening to stop its publication in no uncertain manner.<sup>15</sup> The *Daily* continued publication behind locked doors and barricaded windows, with members of the literary staff, armed with loaded revolvers, ready to ambush any unwanted intruders. Eventually, a hastily formed vigilante committee of businessmen and other citizens tarred and feathered Hervey for personal reasons; he left town, still threatening to 'do' for De Garis. The *Sun* ceased publication on 29 October 1921.<sup>16</sup>

In the background at the *Sunraysia Daily* office from December 1920 was a young man whose family was to provide, in time, the continuity and managerial leadership that

ensured survival for a paper that quickly struck difficulties and could so easily have had as short a life as so many of Australia's provincial dailies. James Lanyon had met De Garis when the aircraft in which the Sunraysia public relations genius was making newspaper deliveries was forced to land in a paddock near Woomelang. Lanyon moved to Mildura to become the newspaper's publisher. Soon his son, Charles Dudley Lanyon, was offered a job in the office at the *Sunraysia Daily* and decided the newspaper opportunity was more exciting than continuing to work for the post office at Woomelang. When he started at the newspaper as assistant accountant on 20 December 1920, he almost changed his mind. Not even the first edition of the *Daily*, two months earlier, had been 'charged' and so no money was coming in from advertising. His first goal was to update the charging. Even then, it was clear to Lanyon that too little revenue was being earned. One Monday's edition in January 1921 brought in only £14.<sup>17</sup> Lanyon became the secretary of the company in March 1924 and received a bonus of £24 that year. In January 1940 he was appointed the manager.<sup>18</sup>

### **Insolvent country 'rag' hawked all over Australia**

Adding to the *Sunraysia Daily's* woes at the beginning, De Garis invested his capital and time so widely, from Western Australia to Melbourne, that his funds ran out in little more than two years.<sup>19</sup> He borrowed heavily from Levy Brothers Successors Pty Ltd at an exorbitant rate of interest. Levy Brothers took over the Sunraysia Daily Ltd on 14 May 1923, and appointed S.M. Lyons as receiver and manager, with instructions to close the newspaper if necessary. C.D. Lanyon told a newspaper conference in 1951:

From 1921 to 1923 an insolvent country 'rag' was hawked all over Australia. The receiver, a charming fellow (Sol Lyons), acting for Abrahams Brothers of Small Arms fame, just couldn't sell this Mildura *Sunraysia Daily* despite all sorts of inducements ... two of our friends in Mildura today admit their fathers refused to purchase this derelict at about forty per cent less than R.D. Elliott persuaded his partners, Dr Earle Page and the late P.G. Stewart, to pay for it.<sup>20</sup>

Various attempts were made to form a syndicate to buy the company but no progress was made until 13 February 1924 when New Sunraysia Daily Pty Ltd – with Percy Gerald Stewart, the Federal Minister for Works and Railways, R.D. Elliott, of Melbourne, and Ethel Esther Page, wife of Dr Earle Page, the Deputy Prime Minister, as equal one-third shareholders – bought the paper. The company had been registered two days earlier.<sup>21</sup> Earle Page was the Country Party Leader and the chairman of directors of the *Daily Examiner*, Grafton, NSW. Managing editor Stephens – who had worked 8.30am to 3.30am at the *Sunraysia Daily*, with an hour for lunch and an hour for dinner, seven days a week – departed. In August 1924 the new proprietary appointed as manager George Silverton Baxter, son of the proprietor of the *Ballarat Star*, which was in its final days, and William Bluff Hoare as editor.<sup>22</sup>

### **Enter the politicians**

Robert Charles Dunlop Elliott (1884-1950), a banker, construction contractor, dynamic businessman, philanthropist and Country Party politician, became the dominant figure in the New Sunraysia Daily Pty Ltd, even though Stewart, who contributed a weekly article to the paper on Mallee farming throughout the 1920s, was chairman, 1924-27. Elliott was appointed chairman on 25 April 1927 and emerged as the sole proprietor in 1935. Ethel Page sold her 4,334 shares to Elliott on 30 September 1932 and ceased to be a director. Stewart was no longer a director after April 1927, but retained his financial interest until his death on 15 October 1931. There had been a split between Stewart and Earle Page since August 1924 when Stewart resigned his portfolio in protest against a pact between Prime Minister Bruce and Page that gave electoral protection to sitting members. Stewart and A.A. Dunstan organised the Victorian Country Progressive Party, a radical group with its power

base in Bendigo and the Mallee. It effectively held the balance of power in Victoria in the late 1920s. In March 1929 Stewart was the only Country Party member to support Labor's proposal for a Federal wheat-marketing scheme; in September he voted against the abolition of the Federal arbitration system, thus helping to bring down the Bruce-Page Government.<sup>23</sup> On Stewart's death, his shareholding in New Sunraysia Daily Pty Ltd passed to his wife, Edith Catherine Stewart, who, after remarrying, sold her interest to Elliott in November 1935.<sup>24</sup> Elliott was paid £20 a week 'free of State and Federal taxation', by the company from 1 October 1932 'to cover his services for and expenses on behalf of the company'.

For Elliott the *Sunraysia Daily* became the foundation on which to build a provincial press empire, known from 11 June 1950 – shortly after his death – as the Elliott Provincial Newspaper Group and from 24 June 1965, when it was buying newspapers in Melbourne, as the Elliott Newspaper Group. Among the newspapers Elliott acquired were small titles such as the *Ouyen Mail*, which was 'just about paying its way' in January 1932, and the *Woomelang Sun* and the *Mallee Harvester*, Murrayville, which were losing heavily.<sup>25</sup> Better-known Elliott acquisitions were the *Castlemaine Mail* (1932), *Shepparton Advertiser* and *Goulburn Valley Yeoman* (1934), *Swan Hill Guardian* (1937), *Wentworth Evening News* (1938), *Albury Banner* (1940), *Yarrowonga Chronicle* (1943), *Cobram Courier* (1944), *Maryborough Advertiser* (1945), *Cohuna Farmers' Weekly* (1947) and *Wangaratta Chronicle-Despatch* (1949).<sup>26</sup> Elliott used to say the company had 'bought Cobram because it was "the worst paper we'd ever seen"; maybe this was an exaggeration but not by much', recalled C.D. Lanyon. When they had considered buying the *Albury Banner*, they agreed 'the only thing in its favour was its past and the fact that Albury was at the source of the supply of water that flowed down to Swan Hill and Mildura'. The *Banner* was closed in 1950 'to give an opportunity to develop a really good job printing business'.<sup>27</sup> At Wangaratta, Elliott bought a controlling half-interest in the *Chronicle-Despatch* from the Higgins family, but it was a benevolent arrangement, as history has shown. In 1947 when it was felt Mooroopna, a suburb of Shepparton, needed a mouthpiece, Elliott opened the *Mooroopna Advertiser*, feeding off the *Shepparton Advertiser*.<sup>28</sup> Clippings books still in the possession of the Elliott Newspaper group reveal how his newspapers were used as agents of political persuasion in an era when the box in the corner of the lounge was a wireless set and the voices heard through the static were entertaining and not persuading.

### **Elliott the media player**

Elliott was a medium-sized player in an era of smaller corporate enterprises. The *Castlemaine* paper was a daily when he bought it, the *Shepparton Advertiser* was not a daily but he soon made it one, the *Maryborough* paper had been a daily, and, the *Wangaratta* paper became a daily after he died. Elliott had wider newspaper interests, on a minority scale, and became a director of Western Newspapers Ltd, based on Bathurst, NSW; a director of the news agency, Australian United Press; and a foundation director of the Australian Provincial Daily Press Ltd. In 1947 his group was reported to own fourteen Victorian newspapers and five NSW 'cousins', as well as Radio MA Mildura.<sup>29</sup> At one stage, after World War II, as a matter of policy the group's country papers carried the slogan, 'Don't pray for rain – dam it', reflecting not only his dam-building background but also the irrigation ethos of the Sunraysia district.<sup>30</sup> Elliott had become attached to the Murray Valley and energetically promoted its development.<sup>31</sup>

Elliott's politicking and newspapering were all of a piece. He was elected to the Senate on 17 November 1928 and was sworn in on 14 August 1929. He served until 30 June 1935, narrowly losing his seat in a bitterly fought election campaign. With all Victorian Federal Country Party members, including W.G. Gibson, he had rejected the State executive's demand for a conformity pledge for the election of 15 September 1934. Elliott was dropped from the United Australia Party-Country Party Senate ticket, but Gibson was not. Prime Minister Joseph Lyons had objected to charges of dishonesty and corruption made against his Government in Elliott's *Castlemaine Mail* on 19 August 1933. Elliott observed that 'the political team did not want in Parliament any independent who had a mind of his own'. He

labelled his exclusion from the non-Labor Senate team ‘a political version of bodyline’ – the bowling strategy that England had employed the previous year during the Test cricket series against Australia to try to curb Don Bradman’s prodigious scoring feats.<sup>32</sup> His newspapers editorialised strongly in favour of his stance, as clippings books relating to the election campaign show.<sup>33</sup> Other newspapers supported him, too, among them being the *Colac Herald* and the *Leader*, Melbourne.<sup>34</sup> Four days after the 1934 election, the *Age* editorialised on the growth of the ‘thinking vote’. It noted that an outstanding example of ‘a pronounced public reaction against the role of machine politics’ had been provided by the Senate poll in Victoria. ‘Whether Senator R.D. Elliott is returned or not, his figures are a splendid vindication of a great fight in a worthy cause, and give all the encouragement that is needed for its continuance.’<sup>35</sup> During his Senate term, Elliott chaired the Senate select committee on the standing committee system and served on the Senate library and disputed returns committees.<sup>36</sup>

## **Elliott and the Empire**

R.D. Elliott was not your common, garden-variety country newspaperman. His education in the power of newspapers began in earnest in 1913 when he married Hilda Fink, daughter of Theodore Fink, chairman of the board of the Melbourne *Herald*. He grew to admire the British press baron, Lord Beaverbrook, who became his exemplar. He joined Beaverbrook’s fervent ‘crusade’, beginning in 1929-30, for ‘Empire Free Trade’. Beaverbrook regarded Elliott as Australia’s voice. They promoted dominion food supplies for Britain, and British manufactures for dominions and colonies with some concessions to dominion manufacturers. In 1940 Elliott went to Britain to serve as special assistant to Beaverbrook in his effective and effervescent wartime ministries (aircraft production, 1940-41, and supply, 1941-42).<sup>37</sup> David Farrer described Elliott unkindly as the least qualified of the Beaverbrook devotees. ‘Like a St Bernard dog he followed his master around, a barrel of adulation around his neck from which Beaverbrook could drink at need. He was very kind and rather stupid. He bumbled.’ Farrer bumbled himself when he said Elliott came from New Zealand.<sup>38</sup> After Elliott had died on 6 March 1950, aged sixty-three, Lord Beaverbrook wrote to Hilda Elliott to tell her what a ‘splendid ally and great patriot’ her late husband had been.<sup>39</sup> Elliott bequeathed to the City of Mildura his magnificent art collection – once described as ‘without doubt, the finest private collection of British contemporary art in Australia’ – and it became the inspiration for the building of the Mildura Art Gallery.<sup>40</sup>

R.D. Elliott died childless and intestate. Two years later Sir Keith Murdoch, chairman of the Herald and Weekly Times Ltd (HWT), considered the possibility of buying the *Daily*, sending Keith Henry McDonald, the Queensland Newspapers Pty Ltd assistant manager, to investigate. McDonald was constrained by the knowledge that Murdoch did not want to spend any money to make the acquisition. McDonald submitted a report on Friday, 3 October 1952, before flying back to Brisbane; he proposed that the acquisition be financed by the sale of the Elliott group’s smaller newspapers and its Mildura radio station. Little more than 24 hours later, Sir Keith died. C.D. Lanyon, by then the chief executive of the Elliott group, bought out the Elliott interest with the backing of HWT and became sole proprietor. HWT gained preemptive rights to buy the shares in the event that they were to be resold.<sup>41</sup> The later development of the Elliott group – the Lanyon years – will be discussed below.

The group’s interests varied from the smallest of papers to forays into daily publication. It started the first daily at Shepparton, 1934-1936, and issued the only daily that Wangaratta has had, 1958-1963. Two early Wangaratta newspapers – the *North-Eastern Dispatch* (established in 1862) and the *Wangaratta Chronicle* (1884) – amalgamated in April 1937 as the *Wangaratta Chronicle-Despatch* (note the spelling change), and the combined title began appearing daily in 1958.<sup>42</sup> William Thomas Higgins bought the *Dispatch* since 1 January 1921.<sup>43</sup> The deaths of one Higgins son (Brian Hartley Higgins, a skilled journalist) during World War II and of the father, W.T. Higgins, in March 1949 created a financial crisis for the family. Thus, William Francis Higgins (1912-1989) became the heir. To end the financial crisis, he allowed the Elliott group to take a fifty per cent controlling interest in

1949, with the Higgins family retaining a fifty per cent non-controlling interest.<sup>44</sup> The benevolence of the Elliott group interest was demonstrated when it lent money to the Higgins family to enable it to buy back Elliott interest on 1 April 1982.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Lanyons take over**

At Mildura in the second half of the twentieth century, the Elliott Provincial Newspaper Group – later the Elliott Newspaper Group (ENG) – could more aptly be described as the Lanyon group. After the death of R.D. Elliott in 1950, chief executive officer Charles Dudley Lanyon (1902-1988) soon acquired a controlling interest in the company. Lanyon, described by son Bill as a ‘workaholic’, worked seven days a week in the office all his life. Bill Lanyon’s first realisation that he was the member of a newspaper family came when his father would take him to light the gas Linotype pots on Sunday afternoon so that the *Sunraysia Daily* did not have to pay an employee to go in a few hours earlier than the normal shift starting time. C.D. Lanyon’s firm philosophy was that the paper was for the local community.

... we ran different papers in different areas. We believed that the newspaper really did belong to the community that it served. We obviously took stances on certain issues that we felt very strongly about but we felt that we were supporting in those cases the majority of the views of the constituted authority ... We were almost non-political in Mildura, I’ve got to say, because Mildura’s never been a political town. It was more a town that was run by its needs at the time and our closest neighbour is Broken Hill (as a daily) and Broken Hill and Mildura are almost completely opposite in their thoughts.<sup>46</sup>

C.D. Lanyon, a deep thinker on issues affecting the newspaper industry, found cause for reflection in 1951 when he addressed a meeting of Elliott group managers. He compared the economic realities of the day with those prevailing in 1924 when R.D. Elliott had become involved in the Mildura newspaper. In 1924 the weekly payroll of the *Sunraysia Daily* had been £160 compared with £525 in 1951 and the weekly newsprint bill had risen from £30 to £200. Revenue from paper sales had increased by 175 per cent and circulation had increased from less than 2,000 to more than 7,000. In 1951 the group had a chain of newspapers, with 175 permanent employees, and needed a revenue of £3,000 a week to cover costs alone.<sup>47</sup> In 2005 ENG employed 203 people full-time plus 22 full-time equivalents in part-timers and casuals.<sup>48</sup>

Under Lanyon, ENG continued to expand. In the mid 1960s, with the encouragement of the Herald & Weekly Times Ltd, it bought some Melbourne suburban titles, including the *Lilydale Express*, *Yarra Valley News*, *Ringwood and Croydon Mail*. ‘Gee, that’s a tough business!’ remarked Bill Lanyon. ENG sold the suburbs to the Leader group when the Motts were the owners. ENG bought the *Kyneton Guardian* on 24 April 1965, and the *Benalla Standard* in March 1966 only to sell it fifteen months later to the *Benalla Ensign*, which closed the *Standard* on 22 June 1967. The links with the origins of the *Sunraysia Daily* were made more tenuous when C.D. Lanyon released the day-to-day reins of control of the group in November 1970, but continued as chairman of the board, and they were broken when he died on 13 April 1988.<sup>49</sup>

### **A dynasty takes shape**

William Russell (Bill) Lanyon (b. 1937) became the company secretary in 1960, the manager of the *Daily* in 1969 and the executive chairman in 1988 on his father’s death. It was not automatically accepted that the Lanyon children would follow in their father’s footsteps. Bill’s brother, Donald James, became an industrial chemist and never took an active part in the business. His sister, Dorothy, worked at Radio 3MA for a number of years but she was a mothercraft nurse by profession. Bill matriculated but study at university, choosing instead to work in the family business. He gained experience in all phases, from journalism to printing to the administrative office. He gained accountancy qualifications. Since 1985 he has been based in Melbourne. In 2005, his eldest son, Ross, an accountancy graduate, was managing

director of the *Sunraysia Daily* and ENG secretary, and another son, Jamie, was the assistant manager of the *Sunraysia Daily*. Two nephews were in the business, too: Bruce Ellen, as general manager of the group's Gippsland newspapers, but he is based at the *Latrobe Valley Express*, Morwell; and Tim Ellen, as general manager of Visibility Signs, an outdoor signage company that is part of ENG.<sup>50</sup>

Bill Lanyon is acutely aware that once the *Geelong Advertiser* switched from broadsheet format to tabloid on 21 November 2001, the *Sunraysia Daily* had become the final broadsheet amongst provincial dailies – ‘the last of the Mohicans’, as he calls it. He used to be absolutely unwavering in his allegiance to broadsheet for the Mildura daily, but by late 2002 he sometimes entertained doubt. His main argument against making the *Daily* a tabloid is that most readers of that paper do not read it on a bus or tram. He does not want to change for change's sake. He likes the look, the feel, of a broadsheet. When the time comes to change, ‘there'll be some pressing reason why we do it, whether it's availability of paper or change of press or plates or centralised printing ... I must admit when I get on the little plane and fly from Mildura to Melbourne, reading the *Sunraysia Daily* is a bit bloody awkward’.<sup>51</sup> When company secretary Ross Lanyon was asked in August 2005 whether the *Daily* was still a broadsheet, he said, ‘Well, my dad's still alive.’<sup>52</sup>

### Going with the known

The caution evident in the adherence to the broadsheet format appears in other areas of the ENG business. ENG allowed other newspapers to make the running with web offset printing when the technology became available in the mid-1960s. Bill Lanyon said ENG did not want to put its neck on the chopping block and take a chance at the cutting edge of technology. It made the change on 26 February 1979.<sup>53</sup> Once it had installed an offset press at Mildura, it closed the press at Swan Hill and began printing outside papers, too. In selecting managers for their newspapers, the Lanyons have always believed in promoting from within, if possible – in going with the known. David Tulloch (b.1936), who retired only in June 2005 after 24 years as general manager of the *Gippsland Times*, Sale, started at Mildura as a cadet journalist, and accompanied Bill Lanyon on ‘my very first assignment as a journalist’. Lanyon said he had no preconceived ideas about what sort of background his managers should have.

I think the opportunities come from possibly being in the right place at the right time, but more particularly from their capabilities. Des Morris (formerly Mildura) was from a sales background; Tulloch (formerly Sale), editorial; Denis Cox (Castlemaine), production; Ellen (Morwell), accounting; Rob Duffield (Swan Hill), marketing.<sup>54</sup>

Bill is chairman and managing director. The other two shareholders, both directors, are his brother, Donald James Lanyon, and sister, Dorothy Ellen. There are trusts involved, too, such as the Taylor Trust.

The career and reflections of Desmond Frank Morris (b. 1936) provide insights into how the Elliott Newspaper group has operated and prospered. Morris joined the *Sunraysia Daily* on 1 July 1958 as what was known as a ‘space salesman’ and what is now known as a sales representative. After four years he was shifted to the administrative department and studied accountancy at night school. Two years later, Charles Lanyon posted him to the *Swan Hill Guardian* as general manager to deal with the emergence of a rival newspaper, the *Mid Murray Illustrated*, which had started in Swan Hill in mid-1964.<sup>55</sup> The *Swan Hill Guardian* converted from a bi-weekly broadsheet to a tri-weekly tabloid on 4 May 1964 to help combat the free paper.<sup>56</sup> Through the *Guardian*, ENG bought Murray Valley Printers Pty Ltd, closed the *Illustrated*, and employed Michael Day as a printer and part-time cartoonist.<sup>57</sup>

When Bill Lanyon decided to move to Melbourne in 1984 to live he installed Morris as general manager of the *Sunraysia Daily* and ENG northern divisional manager from 1 January 1985.<sup>58</sup> Morris had to contend with managing a far more varied enterprise than the ones that confronted his colleagues at the Regional Dailies of Australia Ltd. Apart from the *Daily*, the northern division of ENG included *Mildura Midweek*, Sunraysia Printers Pty Ltd,

Duraprint, Radio 3MA and Sunraysia Broadcasters Pty Ltd. ENG was a major shareholder in the local television licensee, STV-8. Morris also became managing director of Radio 3YB Warrnambool and 3CV Bendigo, and had oversight of the *Guardian*, Swan Hill. The cross-media ownership laws passed in 1987 led ENG to sell off Mildura TV and in 1990 ENG sold Radio 3MA and 3YB Warrnambool. It amalgamated Sunraysia Printers with Duraprint and later sold that company.<sup>59</sup>

One of Morris's early lessons in confronting newspaper competition came at Morwell where an ambitious journalist, Patrick Duncan Hegarty (1938-1986), launched a free weekly – printed offset – to challenge three paid-circulation letterpress newspapers in the Latrobe Valley. An introductory issue of the *Latrobe Valley Express* appeared on 18 June 1965 but the first fully regular issue appeared on 14 July 1965. It promised 'saturation circulation' in the urban areas of Moe, Newborough, Yallourn, Yallourn North, Hernes, Oak, Morwell and Traralgon – an industrial demographic of 80,000 people.<sup>60</sup> Hegarty had edited the *Traralgon Journal* for nine years before becoming news editor for GLV-10, the local television licensee.<sup>61</sup> After two years there, he could see that GLV News had no future as a live local program; and there was a great need for a regional newspaper which would carry news and advertisements over the borders of the several warring municipalities which maintained a fragmented Central Gippsland. 'Separate weekly and bi-weekly, small-circulation, paid newspapers served the individual towns and districts, which meant national advertisers and local firms had to buy space in up to five papers to cover the Latrobe Valley – regarded as one of Victoria's few regional growth centres of the 60s.'<sup>62</sup> All this coincided with a revolution that was taking place in newspaper technology in the United States and Europe. Computers that could produce type on photographic paper and presses that could transfer this 'paper' image on to newsprint with superb reproduction quality had been developed. The equipment was available at a fraction of the cost of the cumbersome hot-metal typesetters and letterpress machines that had been used for producing newspapers for eighty years. The big hurdles that Hegarty had to overcome were 'a lack of guts and an even greater lack of money'. He took the plunge with a few former colleagues from the Traralgon paper.<sup>63</sup>

### **Don't compete; take control**

The *Express* severely dented the paid newspapers in its region. They could not compete in circulation or penetration. Hegarty had the advantage with excellent photo reproduction. 'Suddenly,' said Des Morris, 'our letterpress papers were economically failing.'<sup>64</sup> In the second half of 1968, ENG had bought the *Latrobe Valley Advocate & Advertiser* – which had formerly been two separate titles, the *Morwell Advertiser* and the *Moe Advocate* – and issued it as two separate bi-weeklies from 3 March 1969.<sup>65</sup> At Charles Lanyon's request, Morris surveyed the Latrobe Valley situation and reported that the three ENG paid papers could not compete against a free offset tabloid that had a distribution greater than their combined circulation. Traders were voting with their hip pocket and buying the greatest penetration for the cheapest price. Morris said there was only one thing to do: start a free paper in opposition. Lanyon said, 'No, there's one other thing... we can buy them out.' And they did – 'they' being ENG, as the majority partner, and K.S. Hopkins and Sons Pty Ltd, publisher of the *Warragul Gazette*.

The purchase, which became official on 9 February 1970, turned out, as Morris put it, 'to be one hell of a good deal'. ENG kept publishing the Moe and Morwell papers, but in 1972, when Morris returned because neither the *Express* nor the paid papers were doing well, he found that 'they were still operating as though they were in opposition and owned separately and they were cutting their [advertising] rates against one another'. On hearing this, Lanyon ordered Morris to close both paid papers. ENG continued publishing the *Traralgon Journal* because it was more remote from the *Express*. 'Suddenly things were viable,' said Morris.<sup>66</sup> The *Express* became a bi-weekly in June 1973 and a tri-weekly on 15 April 1986 before reverting to bi-weekly issue nearly ten years later, on 9 January 1996. The original staff of seven had grown to 320 by 1990.<sup>67</sup> In 1992 ENG sold half of its 80 per cent

interest in the *Express* and of its 100 per cent in the *Gippsland Times*, Sale, to Rural Press Ltd so that it gained a useful ally. So far it has no regrets about the alliance.<sup>68</sup>

Newspapers rarely put down on paper a statement of editorial policy, but the *Sunraysia Daily* has been unafraid to stand separate on this score, too, although the Dunn family group in Queensland prepared a written editorial policy statement in 1966. In a mid-twentieth-century American study of social control in the newsroom, Warren Breed concluded that policy was never written down. Instead, policy was made clear through such means as the make-up of the paper, which was, in effect, 'a policy order'.<sup>69</sup> In 1968, C.D. Lanyon produced a three-foolscap-page document of single-spaced typing that set out, amongst other things, the editorial policy of the *Sunraysia Daily*, which also produced the news for Radio 3MA and for STV Channel 8.

The general policy of *Sunraysia Daily* is based on an endeavour to further the progress and development of the circulation area. The newspaper supports no political party but does attempt to maintain the status quo and give support in this regard. It declines publicity to the Communist Party. Its columns are open to most religious groups, but not Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>70</sup>

The *Daily* also strongly supported moves for better education, strong local government, and vigorous service clubs and devoted many columns to sport, with particular emphasis on spectator sports. The letters-to-the-editor column provided a safety valve for members of the public opposed to any particular policy line adopted.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

Mildura's *Sunraysia Daily*, the only broadsheet regional daily newspaper remaining in Australia, has demonstrated that it is unafraid to stand alone on issues more crucial than publishing format. When owned by R.D. Elliott, who had rescued it from seemingly certain economic oblivion, the *Daily* had unashamedly boosted the irrigation districts surrounding Mildura and stuck its neck out for the political causes he espoused. It became the flagship of an eclectic group of newspapers that somehow earned enduring loyalty from long-serving managers such as Des Morris, David Tulloch and others. The Elliott-raised newspaper group continues to serve its various communities in distinctive ways that would have pleased the ENG founder.

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<sup>1</sup> The first Mildura newspaper was the *Mildura Irrigationist and Murray River Agricultural Times*, published from 8 February 1888 until 6 June 1896, as the extant issues show.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Laphorne, *Mildura Calling*, p.12.

<sup>3</sup> *Mildura Telegraph*, 9 May 1913, editorial.

<sup>4</sup> *Merbein Irrigationist*, 12 November 1919, No.2; Darragh, p.311.

<sup>5</sup> *Mildura Telegraph*, 28 September 1920; *Mildura Cultivator* ceased 29 September 1920; *Merbein Irrigationist*, 29 September 1920.

<sup>6</sup> David Nichols, 'The heart of the wilderness: fighting for Mildura, 1919-21', paper presented at the Australian Historical Association conference, Mildura, September 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Laphorne, p.70.

<sup>8</sup> The trial issues appeared on 2, 5, 7 and 9 October 1920.

<sup>9</sup> *Sunraysia Daily*, 16 October 1920, p.4 (the *Daily*'s various historical notes on the history of the paper are incorrect in saying the *Daily* began on 15 October 1920; this incorrect date was presented in the notes over the editorial in the 1930s and 1940s while the statement of opinion appeared on Page 4).

<sup>10</sup> *ENG Newsletter*, undated, but ca October 1970.

<sup>11</sup> *Sunraysia Daily*, 16 October 1920, pp.1 and 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Sunraysia Daily*, 15 and 30 November and 18, 28, 29, 30 and 31 December 1920.

<sup>13</sup> Nichols, 'The heart of the wilderness: fighting for Mildura, 1919-21'.

<sup>14</sup> *Mildura & Merbein Sun*, 8 January 1921, p.2.

<sup>15</sup> Nichols, 'The heart of the wilderness: fighting for Mildura, 1919-21'.

<sup>16</sup> Laphorne, p.71; Grant Hervey, 'The Sun: A journalistic javelin aimed at crooks', *Mildura & Merbein Sun*, 29 October 1929.

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- <sup>17</sup> *Sunraysia Daily*, 15 October 1970, p.1, and 15 April 1988, p.1; William Russell Lanyon, interview with author, Balwyn, Victoria, 3 October 2002.
- <sup>18</sup> Minutes of Sunraysia Daily Pty Ltd, 5 November 1939 and 27-28 January 1940.
- <sup>19</sup> Laphorne, p.71.
- <sup>20</sup> C.D. Lanyon, typescript of opening remarks at a group conference held by Elliott Newspaper Group Pty Ltd, 1951.
- <sup>21</sup> Entry for Robert Charles Dunlop Elliott, *ADB*, Vol. 8, pp.431-433; entry for Percy Gerald Stewart, *ADB*, Vol. 12, pp.92-93; notes from Ross Lanyon, secretary, Elliott Newspaper group, undated but received 11 August 2003.
- <sup>22</sup> 'Notes on Sunraysia Daily', undated typescript held by Elliott Newspaper Group, Melbourne; Laphorne, p.71; *Sunraysia Daily*, 15 October 1970, p.1.
- <sup>23</sup> Entry for Percy Gerald Stewart, *ADB*, Vol. 12, pp.92-93.
- <sup>24</sup> Entry for Percy Gerald Stewart, *ADB*, Vol. 12, pp.92-93; minutes of New Sunraysia Daily Pty Ltd, 22 November 1935 (held by Elliott Newspaper Group).
- <sup>25</sup> Minutes of Goulburn Valley Newspapers Pty Ltd, 25 April 1927, 10 March 1930, 26 February 1929, 28 January, 20 September and 4 October 1932.
- <sup>26</sup> Elliott Newspaper Group, typescript material on R.D. Elliott, held by author; entry for Robert Charles Dunlop Elliott, *ADB*, Vol. 8, pp.431-433.
- <sup>27</sup> C.D. Lanyon, typescript, 1951.
- <sup>28</sup> C.D. Lanyon, typescript, 1951.
- <sup>29</sup> Elliott Newspaper Group, typescript material on R.D. Elliott, held by author; entry for Robert Charles Dunlop Elliott, *ADB*, Vol. 8, pp.431-433; entry for Percy Gerald Stewart, *ADB*, Vol. 12, pp.92-93; *Newspaper News*, 2 June 1947, p.12; minutes of Goulburn Valley Newspapers Pty Ltd, 1932-1958, p.13, held by Elliott Newspaper Group Pty Ltd, Mildura.
- <sup>30</sup> The "Don't pray for rain; dam it" quote had appeared in the 1880s and was used by Bishop James Moorhouse, who became Anglican shepherd of Melbourne, according to James Murray, *Weekend Australian*, 5-6 June 2004, p.20. It was first used above the editorial in the *Sunraysia Daily* on 27 January 1947, and was preceded by: "For Australia –". The *Daily* had been in the habit of using other pithy statements above its leading article, such as "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (27 February 1945) and "Sunraysia Daily's Platform for Australia: Decentralisation of people and industry" (2 January 1946). The "Don't pray for rain" quote ran until 14 October 1947.
- <sup>31</sup> *The Elliott Collection: Mildura Art Gallery*, p.6.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Bodyline in politics: Senator Elliott attacks machine', undated [but late August 1934] newspaper clipping, datelined Melbourne.
- <sup>33</sup> Two books of 1934 election-campaign clippings are held by the Elliott Newspaper Group Pty Ltd at its Mildura offices, along with the minutes books of associated companies.
- <sup>34</sup> *Colac Herald*, 6 August 1934, editorial; *Leader*, Melbourne, 8 September 1924, editorial;
- <sup>35</sup> *Age*, Melbourne, 18 September 1934, editorial.
- <sup>36</sup> Entry for Robert Charles Dunlop Elliott, *ADB*, Vol. 8, pp.431-433.
- <sup>37</sup> Entry for Robert Charles Dunlop Elliott, *ADB*, Vol. 8, pp.431-433; entry for Theodore Fink, *ADB*, Vol. 8, pp.497-498.
- <sup>38</sup> David Farrer, *G-for God Almighty: A Personal Memoir of Lord Beaverbrook*, p.86.
- <sup>39</sup> Lord Beaverbrook, letter to Mrs Elliott, 11 April 1950, copy held by author.
- <sup>40</sup> *The Elliott Collection: Mildura Art Gallery*, pp.12-15.
- <sup>41</sup> R.M. Younger, *Keith Murdoch: Founder of a Media Empire*, pp.342-342, 346-347; Keith Henry McDonald, interview with author, Brisbane, 20 October 2005.
- <sup>42</sup> *Wangaratta Chronicle-Despatch*, 14 December 1961, p.11.
- <sup>43</sup> *Wangaratta Despatch*, 27 March 1937, p.3; *Wangaratta Chronicle*, 27 March 1937, p.3; *Wangaratta Chronicle-Despatch*, 3 April 1937 and 14 December 1961, p.16, and 10 September 1984.
- <sup>44</sup> Brian Hartley Higgins, interview with author, Melbourne, 24 March 2003, and facsimile message to author, 21 October 2002; *Victorian Country Press Association Annual Conference Proceedings*, 1943, pp.16-17, and 1949, pp.36-37.
- <sup>45</sup> Rod Kirkpatrick, 'Editor with grand vision starts two Beechworth papers', *PANPA Bulletin*, November 2002, pp.35-38.
- <sup>46</sup> William Russell Lanyon, interview with author, Melbourne, 3 October 2002.
- <sup>47</sup> C.D. Lanyon, typescript, 1951.
- <sup>48</sup> Ross Lanyon, E-mail messages to author, 6 September 2005.

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- <sup>49</sup> *Kyneton Guardian*, 24 April 1965, p.1; C.D. Lanyon, letter to D.F. Morris, 30 November 1970 (held in Elliott Newspaper Group archives, Mildura; 'A newspaper legend dies', *Sunraysia Daily*, 15 April 1988, pp.1, 5.
- <sup>50</sup> W.R. Lanyon, interview, 3 October 2002; *B&T Weekly*, 10 April 1969.
- <sup>51</sup> W.R. Lanyon, interview, 3 October 2002.
- <sup>52</sup> R.D. Lanyon, telephone interview with author, 31 August 2005. It should also be noted that from 1981 until 1997 the *Gippsland Times*, part of the Elliott Newspaper Group, appeared as the only broadsheet 'free' in Australia.
- <sup>53</sup> *ENG Newsletter*, March 1979, p.12.
- <sup>54</sup> W.R. Lanyon, interview, 3 October 2002.
- <sup>55</sup> The State Library of Victoria has holdings of 11 June 1964 to 13 October 1964; Desmond Frank Morris, interview with author, Warragul, Victoria, 8 February 2002.
- <sup>56</sup> D.F. Morris, interview, 8 February 2002.
- <sup>57</sup> D.F. Morris, interview, 8 February 2002.
- <sup>58</sup> *Guardian*, Swan Hill, 4 January 1985; D.F. Morris, interview, 8 February 2002.
- <sup>59</sup> D.F. Morris, interview, 8 February 2002; 'Elliott Group to concentrate on newspapers', *PANPA Bulletin*, November 1990, p.19.
- <sup>60</sup> *Latrobe Valley Express*, 14 July 1965, p.1.
- <sup>61</sup> 'Historic Community offset press to move again', *PANPA Bulletin*, March 1976, pp.7-10; 'The tale of how it all began', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 17 July 1990, p.19.
- <sup>62</sup> 'The tale of how it all began', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 17 July 1990, p.19.
- <sup>63</sup> 'The tale of how it all began', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 17 July 1990, p.19.
- <sup>64</sup> D.F. Morris, interview, 8 February 2002.
- <sup>65</sup> Unsourced newspaper clipping, dated 21 February 1969 (held in Elliott Newspaper Group files at Mildura).
- <sup>66</sup> D.F. Morris, interview, 8 February 2002; 'The Express owners', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 16 July 1985, p.26.
- <sup>67</sup> 'A newspaper for the whole valley', *Latrobe Valley Express*, 17 July 1990, p.20; Morwell Library, telephone interview, 3 February 2004; Bruce Ellen, letter to author, 15 March 2004; *Latrobe Valley Express*, 10 and 15 April 1986, and 5 and 9 January 1996.
- <sup>68</sup> W.R. Lanyon, interview, 3 October 2002; Joshua Frith, 'Rural press groups in Gippsland alliance', *Australian*, 18 June 1992; Adele Ferguson, 'Gippsland papers deal', *herald-Sun*, 18 June 1992, p.37.
- <sup>69</sup> Warren Breed, 'Social control in the newsroom', in Wilbur Schramm (ed.), *Mass Communications*, pp.178-194.
- <sup>70</sup> 'Sunraysia Daily – 3MA – STV8, 23/5/68', typescript document held by Elliott Newspaper Group; copy also held by author.
- <sup>71</sup> 'Sunraysia Daily – 3MA – STV8, 23/5/68', typescript document.