Chapter 13
Editors as Intellectuals: Three Case Studies

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A common starting-point for discussions of ‘intellectuals’ in Australian society and history — usually after professions of virtuous dissatisfaction with the term’s elitist connotations — is to suggest that there are two distinct conceptions of the intellectual. The first is a broad conception, including everyone in the society who ‘works with ideas’; such people are thus to be found ‘not only in academic and research institutions, but also in a range of occupations that may involve a significant degree of social and cultural expression, such as writers, educators, journalists, lawyers, artists, publishers, politicians, senior public servants, publicists, union officials, corporate executives and theologians’. The second is a narrower, more ‘qualitative’ conception of the intellectual, one that emphasises learning, contemplation, critique and evaluation of the Big Questions in human life, by contrast with the more instrumental and practical relation to ideas characteristic of the mere ‘expert’. It is a conception, as Brian Head wryly observes, that has been ‘highly attractive to many writers who identify themselves as intellectuals’.

For obvious reasons, the former conception has seemed the more useful one for historians and sociologists interested in the social circulation of ideas and their effects, especially when writing about the mass media. Yet if cultural studies has taught us anything in the last decade or so, it is that cultural representations of a given social function can be as important in their effects as the function itself, and may indeed be inseparable from it. Thus a certain image of the intellectual — even with its elitist, essentialist and self-congratulatory baggage — may be just as important for understanding the historical role of intellectuals in Australian journalism as the actual ideas and arguments they work with. Precisely because of those connotations, the notion of the intellectual can function — and, I shall argue, has sometimes functioned within Australian journalism — as a way of distinguishing certain ways of thinking and speaking, certain modes of address, a certain kind of perspective on a subject, even a certain persona, as those of ‘the intellectual’, and marking them as either foreign to the typically ‘journalistic’ perspective or different from it; but nonetheless — and this is the key point — available as a self-presenting and self-fashioning option to individual journalists. Indeed, the very anti-intellectualism of the
Australian popular press in general, while it has undoubtedly discouraged highly reflective, culturally allusive writing across the institution, has at the same time helped to define the persona quite sharply and to make it self-conscious and strategic.

What I propose to do in this chapter is to examine some of the ways in which the idea of the intellectual has functioned in Australian journalism for the last half century or so, paying particular attention to the work of three prominent editors of major daily newspapers belonging to three of the four companies which have dominated the Australian print media for the last fifty years, Australian Consolidated Press, John Fairfax Pty Ltd, and News Limited. The editors in question are Brian Penton, editor of the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*, 1941-51; John Douglas Pringle, twice editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1952-57 and 1965-70; and Paul Kelly, editor-in-chief of *The Australian*, 1991-96.

I have chosen these particular editors because each of them has or had well-grounded claims to being an intellectual in his own right, even by the most exclusive definitions: because together they span the last fifty years of Australian history; and because they worked as editors for three very different proprietors — Frank Packer, Warwick Fairfax and Rupert Murdoch — and developed the kinds of relationships with them that their proprietors’ personalities and their companies’ organisational cultures allowed.

The more important question, however, is ‘Why editors?’ Here the answer is less clear-cut, but it has to do with trying to gain a sense of how complex ideas, positions and relationships are not only developed and explained by individual intellectuals, but of how they can be mediated and disseminated by editorial and managerial strategies. In this respect the organising, coordinating, directive and often pre-emptive role of the editor may be just as important intellectually as any individually authored contributions — including even the editor’s own editorials and occasional articles.

The temptation to see the role of intellectuals in the media in terms of individual voices is very strong, understandably so, since many of the best-known intellectuals who have written for the dailies over the years — Phillip Adams, Max Harris and Humphrey McQueen, for example — have done so from a self-consciously marginal position on the edge of the ‘newspaper world’, and often sharply critical of it (though not usually of the particular organ they are writing for — or not for long!). Such figures are usually columnists (regular or occasional), and the column typically develops, over time, into a vehicle for the elaboration of a distinctive personality and voice, and an individualised set of attitudes and views.

At a further remove from the hub of the wheel, so to speak, are those individual intellectuals — writers, academics, politicians and lawyers — who have only a casual, commissioned relationship with the newspaper for the purpose of special articles on topics of public interest or contemporary controversy. These figures may or may not have high individual profiles outside their particular
institution or profession; but even when they do not their extramural affiliations limit the extent to which they are perceived as aligned with the intellectual orientations of the newspaper as a whole. Indeed such an alignment is often explicitly disclaimed on both sides.

The consequence of this dispersed arrangement of intellectual ‘inputs’ is that daily newspapers, at least in Australia, are rarely perceived as having clearly defined intellectual agendas or orientations of their own, though they are usually unmistakably aligned in party-political terms, especially at election times. In this respect — their intellectual non-alignment — they differ from the many small-circulation journals, quarterlies, monthlies and little magazines — Meanjin, Nation, Quadrant, The Anglica, The Observer and the rest — which tend to have quite strongly defined (though not unchanging) intellectual agendas, articulated in and through high-profile editor-intellectuals, such as Clem Christesen, Tom Fitzgerald, George Munster, James McAuley, Francis James, Donald Horne, Peter Coleman and Robert Manne.

The task of the editor (or editor-in-chief) of a big metropolitan daily is obviously very different from that of a journal editor, and the opportunities the newspaper affords for analysis, argument and discussion of complex ideas and larger contexts — the intellectual’s forte — are both smaller and greater: smaller in that such a newspaper sets out to address a ‘mass’ readership, for whom allowances have to be made; greater in that it offers a greater purchase on the thinking of the wider community. The editor of a journal is usually an intellectual (in the narrow sense) in his or her own right; it is almost a given condition. Editors of daily newspapers may choose to act as intellectuals, but most do not, and those that do have to invent the ways in which they can be both things at once. The three editor-intellectuals I want to discuss in this chapter made different compromises, struck different balances, and privileged different strategies; what they shared was an intention to integrate the roles of editor and intellectual in an active and creative fashion, and all of them, at some stage in their careers, seem to have made it work.

Brian Penton

The challenging duality of the position might have been most clearly apprehended by the first of the three, Brian Penton, whose eighteen year career with the Sydney Daily Telegraph sketches out very clearly a process of confronting and reconciling the contradictions between the roles of editor and intellectual. In 1941 Penton, by then editor of the Telegraph, published a book called Think — or Be Damned. It was a vigorous and iconoclastic assault on complacency, hypocrisy and self-delusion in Australia, and it was a big success, with three reprints by 1945. People who were around at the time still speak of it as one of the most memorable publications of the war years.
After ninety-odd pages of sparkling and often fierce polemic on the state of politics, economics, education, and culture in Australia, the book ends with the following bald and sober sentence: ‘The aim of this document is to suggest a method of thinking outside yourself’.\(^2\)

The very incongruity of the statement, coming as it does at the end of a rather ornate peroration (recommending, for example, ‘the incontrovertible truth, through which alone men have raised themselves from the slime, that human welfare is promoted by a painful search for knowledge of and adjustment to the world outside us, not by blowing bubbles’), invites reflection as to precisely how Penton was framing and directing his irascible rhetorical persona.

The model of the book as a *propaedeutic* device, acting less as an instrument of direct persuasion than as a catalyst for producing a new way of thinking — ‘straight thinking’ — is made explicit at various other strategic points: near the beginning, for example, where readers are told to betake themselves to their nearest public library to find, read and inwardly digest an American publication, *The Tyranny of Words* by Stuart Chase, and only then to return to Penton for further instructions on how to apply Chase’s ideas.

There were many reasons why Penton would have found them congenial, but for our present purposes, his appropriation of Chase in *Think — or be Damned!* is interesting more as a certain kind of intellectual practice than as the transfer of particular ideas. This practice might usefully be called ‘managerial/technical’, a term which denotes, firstly, the intellectual subject’s relatively distanced, manipulative relationship to the object-community, a relationship in which the intellectual attempts to act upon that community by ‘managing’ — and perhaps modifying — its habitual collective modes of thinking and feeling. Secondly, the term denotes the means by which such intellectuals try to effect their management: this usually involves a ‘technique’ of some description. Once introduced to the technique and trained in its application, the community can, as it were, be left to engineer its own salvation, and the intellectuals responsible for initiating the process can retire to a monitoring brief, managing the change (or the continuity — not all intellectuals are progressives) as it unfolds, rather than actively intervening.

‘Managerial/technical’ intellectual practice, thus conceived, can be placed historically in either a long or a short perspective. In the longer perspective, it is at least as old as the Reformation in Europe when religious intellectuals on both sides of the doctrinal divide devoted their energies, for nearly two centuries, to devising and implementing spiritual techniques — meditation, casuistry, devotional writing and reading of all kinds — for the management of Christian consciences. Similarly, the liberal social reformers and bureaucrats of the nineteenth century, the communist intellectuals of the Third International, even the American post-Freudians of the 1950s and the ‘consciousness-raisers’ of the 1960s, provide examples of secularised versions of the same broadly-
defined practice of modifying and managing the mentality of a target community, and using definite cultural techniques in order to do so.

In the shorter historical perspective of most immediate relevance to Penton’s activities in the 1940s in Sydney, an important context is clearly the rash of books published in the previous decade offering guidance on ‘straight thinking’. Books like Robert Thouless’s *Straight and Crooked Thinking* (1930), L Susan Stebbing’s *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939), and the Stuart Chase book itself — there were many others — promoted a form of mental self-discipline and programmed self-improvement through a variety of psychological and intellectual techniques.

Some of these guides are more explicitly tied to particular historical moments than others. Penton’s contribution to the genre in *Think — or Be Damned!* was in part a direct response to ‘the floods of poisonous rhetoric in the recent election campaign [1940], when one had an opportunity to measure the spiritual and intellectual ability of the men this country has produced to guide it through its most difficult time’.³ But a somewhat broader context in which it seems possible to situate not just Penton’s book but also the many other ‘straight thinking’ guides coming onto the international market at about this time is the new awareness of propaganda.

The key text on propaganda, as far as Penton was concerned in the 1930s, was by Amber Blanco White (formerly Amber Reeves, the lover and collaborator of H G Wells, and the thinly-veiled original of Wells’s *Ann Veronica*). Her book, called *The New Propaganda*, is explicitly informed throughout by White’s commitment to socialism, and by her use of Freudian theory to understand the anxieties and insecurities on which propaganda works — both of which influences might have been expected to put Penton on his guard. But White’s lively analysis of despotic authority structures in terms of primal guilt, anxiety and hostility clearly struck a chord with him, and he reworked it into his own later diagnosis of Australians’ ‘national Oedipus complex’ in relation to ‘Mother’ England, and of their ‘spineless timidity in the face of authority’.

Penton was editor from 1941 to 1951, but it is the *Telegraph* of 1943 that illustrates most dramatically the potentialities of the newspaper as a cultural form. Despite acute labour shortages and newsprint rationing it brought together a complex and varied combination of journalistic genres to inform, to entertain and amuse, and to stimulate intellectual engagement. No merely contingent assemblage of items, the paper is a carefully controlled instrument of political persuasion, developing through the year as a system of continuing features, overlapping and interlocking with one another in a multitude of ways, most of them calculated to promote a certain style of liberalism, and to provoke, shame, cajole, or flatter readers into participating in the discussion of new ideas and new intellectual syntheses.
The most complex and innovative feature was a collaborative series of discussion ‘modules’, initiated by Penton, and run in tandem with the ABC ‘listening groups’ during the last four months of 1943 and the first month or so of 1944. Each Monday the Telegraph published the first of five full-page weekly articles, written by experts, on five different aspects of a general topic relevant to meeting the challenges of the ‘new world order’ after the war. Topics for the modules (‘Australia’s Global Problems’ was one) reflected Penton’s determination to relate Australia’s problems to those of the rest of the world — routinely, habitually — and to make his readers do likewise. As he put it in a feature article in 1941, what Australian planners needed to understand was the impossibility of achieving a ‘New Order’ in Australia alone. The rest of the world had to be included:

Anybody who now set out to plan for Australia a better and juster future ... would have to think not only of improving the lot of the wheat farmer in the Mallee but also of improving the lot of the farmer in the Kansas dustbowl, and in the Argentine pampas as well.

He would have to worry himself not only about the standard of living of the worker on the Australian basic wage, but of the Chinese coolie, and the Hindu untouchable, and the Welsh coalminer, and the Ruhr steelworker, and the Yugoslav peasant, and the American hillbilly also ... For where is the human justice in a plan which keeps our own bellies full while nine-tenths of the rest of the world is starving?5

The later years of Penton’s regime show his ‘managerial/technical’ style of editorship in a less richly varied and dialogical form than the 1943 files, but the integrating dynamic is still powerfully present. For example, in his regular Saturday essay, ‘This Is Why We Said It’ (1945-47), he would summarise and interrelate the previous week’s editorials. As Donald Horne saw it, ‘Penton wanted his readers to see Saturday as revision day’.6

Horne’s reflection on his unabashed didacticism is fair, but the description of the Saturday essays hardly does them justice. Normally the overall focus of the piece (almost 3,000 words long) is broader than the particular topics it raises, and the three or four different topics are firmly linked in a continuous argument running from start to finish. These are no mere tours de force: they represent the way Penton wanted to make people start thinking.

What’s the connection? you may say.
If you do, you don’t surprise us.
For that inability to see the connection ... is what so sorely afflicts our community now.7
Penton's career as a journalist and polemicist, then, would seem to present a classic instance of the 'managerial/technical' variety of intellectual practice. But there is another, very different kind of intellectual practice traceable through Penton's career, for which we might use the term 'organic/charismatic'. Again, the first element denotes a certain type of relationship with the society the intellectual addresses: a close, almost inseparable bonding (often evoked in metaphors of organic connection). The second element denotes the characteristic effectivities of the address: emotive, non-rational, prophetic.

Like the 'managerial/technical' category of intellectual practice, the 'organic/charismatic' has a long pedigree, stretching back to the Old Testament prophets and forward to their emulators in and out of the pulpit from Augustine to Carlyle, even unto Manning Clark, Francis James and Phillip Adams. Within this tradition, an important common thread is the strategic deployment of the self — both the physical and the psychic selves if, for argument's sake, we allow the distinction — as part and parcel of the intellectual's apparatus of exposition and persuasion. The practice of using the self as a rhetorical device had first appeared in Penton's career in 1934-5 in the regular daily column he wrote for the Sydney Telegraph. In this column, called the 'Sydney Spy', he conducted an eighteen-month monologue of real intellectual breadth, on topics as diverse as politics, history, science, education, economics, literature, music, art, and much else besides — interrupted, from time to time, by humorous anecdotes and celebrity interviews. Crucial to the effect of the column, and a key component of its popularity, is the way in which Penton himself becomes entwined in its discourse. His satyr-like physiognomy, for example, and transgressive, abrasive personality quickly become recurrent themes of the column and of its readers' weekly letters, often functioning there as metaphorical or symptomatic articulations of the column's social and cultural themes.

His second, longer book about Australia, Advance Australia — Where? (1943), elaborates a philosophical rationale for finding the forces of history inscribed in the individual: the 'human situation' on the eve of the war, he maintained, was marked by a radical split in western consciousness, a 'painful cleavage at the very base of contemporary mind', resulting from the violent contradictions to which traditional liberal-democratic beliefs had been subjected by monopoly capitalism, scientific scepticism and psychoanalysis. Hocking, Maritain and Niebuhr have now succeeded Freud and Nietzsche as theorisers of the modern dilemma; but again, it is Penton himself whose own split consciousness stands as the implicit paradigm of this condition.

But it was less the philosophic rationale than the daily experiences and activities in the public arena that gave Penton some real purchase in the 1940s as an intellectual in the 'organic/charismatic' mode. Again and again, he became the issue, or at least the route through which certain issues were approached. The 'Censorship Crisis' of 1944, for example (when the
government confiscated entire editions of several Sydney newspapers, becomes (in his account of it) a drama in which he, Penton, was a central protagonist. Similarly, in 1942, arguments about the use of conscripts in New Guinea, and about Australian-American relations, become entangled with the scurrilous personal attacks on Penton in parliament by Arthur Calwell, and Penton’s savage editorial replies and public provocations to sue.

Brian Penton’s career seems, then, to offer abundant instances of two very different modes of intellectual practice that one might expect to be ordinarily incompatible since they involve not just different but opposite stances and strategies. It is an uncommon example of their co-presence in a single career, and made the more so by the fact that it is really not a case of Penton ‘out-growing’ a youthful romanticism to embrace a more hard-nosed intellectual pragmatism in middle age (a variant of the legend of Penton’s ‘sell-out’). There is ample evidence that the two modes coexisted, often interacting productively, from the late 1930s on.

Why did Penton, having secured editorial control of what he clearly believed to be a highly effective instrument for inciting and managing intellectual activity in the community, a daily newspaper, choose to retain the earlier ‘self-centred’ practice in his repertoire? The simplest, and perhaps truest answer is that he enjoyed it. Another, more strategic answer is that it continued to give him something the ‘managerial/technical’ practice could not, namely access to a subject-position outside the rational system of plans, problems and probabilities. It enabled him, for instance — for all his scepticism about postwar reconstruction, and about Australia’s chances of survival without virtual military mergers with Britain and the US — to ‘play around’ with social and political arrangements so different from the way things were as to be nearly unthinkable: an Australia with a dominantly (and peaceably) Asian population, for example! In more general terms, it enabled him to acknowledge and respond to the challenge faced by any intellectual practitioner of substance at some point, namely how to think about the future of society constructively in the knowledge that the very instrument of thought, human consciousness, is trapped and deformed by its confinement to the present and past. It is that sense of a fierce rationalism combined with an equally powerful (if less continuous) sense of the futility of mere rationality and of the need for prophetic vision, that makes Penton one of Australia’s more unusual intellectuals.

Yet it seems to have been Penton’s inescapable lot to be both disliked and disapproved of by many of his fellow journalists. To some extent the dislike was a consequence of his often abrasive staff relations, but the disapproval had to do with the perceived nature of his relationship to Frank Packer. As Don Whittington (a victim of Penton’s managerial zeal after the journalists’ strike of 1944) described it:
Penton was completely unscrupulous, prepared to go to any lengths to please Frank Packer, whose principal interest was making money from his newspapers. Where Syd Deamer and Cyril Pearl would argue with Packer and resist, to the point of downright refusal, proposals he propounded, Penton would not only accept them but was brilliant enough to anticipate Packer’s thinking and to make suggestions in such a way that Packer imagined he had inspired them.9

The perception is probably fairly accurate, but it may well overestimate the rational calculation involved on Penton’s side of the relationship. For him, as for many other Packer employees, it was a deeply invested and, for Penton, genuinely complementary relationship. It was also crucial to the effectiveness of his intellectual project as editor.

J D Pringle

John Douglas Pringle arrived in Australia in August 1952, a year (almost to the day) after Penton’s premature death at the age of 47, ready to take up his post as editor at the Sydney Morning Herald. There is no reason to think that the two men ever met — though as it happens they could have: both men were in London on June 6, 1944, D-Day, and both had interviews during that month with Brendan Bracken, the minister for information; but it seems the long arm of coincidence did not quite stretch to an encounter in the ministerial waiting-room. Penton’s interview with Bracken concerned the former’s pet project of a ‘World Press Secretariat’; Pringle’s concerned the humbler question of his own release from the army to return to journalism.

Pringle was eight years younger than Penton. He had started his career on the Manchester Guardian in 1934, and after what he called a ‘safe, inglorious, but interesting war’, he worked as assistant editor on the Guardian and as a leader-writer for the Times, before being ‘head-hunted’ in London by Rupert Henderson, the legendary managing director of John Fairfax & Co for the editorship of the Sydney Morning Herald.10 He was, as Gavin Souter notes, a slightly surprising choice for the job, given his left-liberalism and agnosticism — neither of them conspicuous attributes of the Herald. But his intellectual calibre, the grace and lucidity of his leaders, and his willingness to work within the paper’s conservative policies and divided management structure, were enough to get him the nod from Henderson.11

Pringle’s intellectual formation included a ‘classical education’ in the most literal and old-fashioned English sense, first at Shrewsbury, then at Lincoln College, Oxford, where he took a First in ‘Classical Greats’. It is difficult to be sure how much or how little importance to attribute to this: Pringle himself had a Gilbertian sense of the absurdity of a system in which, throughout his entire education at Shrewsbury and most of it at Oxford, he studied virtually nothing but Greek and Latin:
it was almost the opposite of what is now considered a good education. It was not progressive. It was not relevant. It did not stimulate our creative powers (if any). It involved a great deal of learning useless information by heart. When I left Shrewsbury at the almost senile age of nineteen I knew absolutely nothing about modern history or politics or economics. We had never heard of social studies.\textsuperscript{12}

It is nonetheless clear that he emerged from the process with an intense curiosity about all the things his classical training had left untouched, and an ability — perhaps sharpened by his classical studies; who can say? — to master the complexities of large subjects in a remarkably short time. Like Penton, he embarked on an intensive program of self-instruction, first in English and European literature, then, from the mid ’30s, in ‘foreign affairs’, becoming one of the Guardian’s experts in that area, and one of those who was convinced from an early date (again like Penton) that war with Nazi Germany was inevitable. In 1938 his reputation for expertise on the far east was such that he was invited by Allen Lane to write a book on China for Penguin.\textsuperscript{13}

An important dimension of Pringle’s early ‘self-fashioning’ as an intellectual, not just in terms of acquiring and organising his knowledge across various fields, but in developing a certain easy, ‘belonging’ relationship with British intellectual elites within which such knowledge was current, was his Oxford background and consequent access to friendships with people on the borders of journalism and academia, particularly professional historians who wrote for the Guardian on commission or retainer, such as J L Hammond, A J P Taylor, Max Beloff and L B (later Sir Lewis) Namier, all of whom wrote leaders for this newspaper.\textsuperscript{14}

Pringle’s own métier, almost from the beginning of his career, was also the anonymous and impersonal leading article. Penton, by contrast, began his career as a columnist, and the opinionated and personalising conventions of the column are evident in his leaders. Their different generic preferences make for an interesting difference in the way the two literary intellectuals used ‘capital L Literature’ — the classics — in their own journalistic practice. For Penton, as for many another columnist, it functioned primarily as a signifier of ‘distinction’ in Bourdieu’s sense, an index of cultural superiority over the bulk of his readers, and of solidarity with the few (though it also served as a source of masks and stereotypes for use in his columns). For Pringle the literary classics had a more direct impact on the writing process itself. In a fascinating account of what he called the Guardian’s ‘intense preoccupation with style’, and of his own internalised version of this, Pringle described his mental preparation thus:

Before I had to write an important leader I would spend half-an-hour reading one of the great prose writers whom I most admired — the essays of Hazlitt, the prefaces of Bernard Shaw or the works of Hume or Bishop Berkeley. This was quite normal [for other leader-writers on the Guardian].\textsuperscript{15}
Such willingness to tap openly into the strength and richness of a ‘great tradition’, whether of English literature, or of a great newspaper like the *Guardian*, is characteristic of Pringle’s confidently ‘metropolitan’ form of progressive liberalism, a form which is less easily available to the colonial intellectual for whom (as for Penton) acknowledged metropolitan debts and filiations are a source of continuing anxiety.

A similar attitude of conscious deference to a larger body of knowledge and experience can be detected in his reflections on the very figure with which we are most concerned, that of the editor-intellectual. Speaking of A P Wadsworth, Pringle’s editor and chief mentor on the *Guardian*, and the journalist he most admired and respected, he notes:

> It is true ... that if one divides editors into those who have a clearcut, consistent, well-thought policy which they argue and expound from day to day and week to week in the hope of influencing men’s minds, and those who prefer to wait for events to happen and then react as their instinct tells them, then Wadsworth clearly belonged to the second category. He did not like to look ahead. He hated to discuss what might happen in the future or what the paper should do in that event. He had no very clear or consistent views on what kind of nation Britain should be or what kind of international system would best preserve peace. He was happiest when something happened unexpectedly or some Minister made a speech whose importance he recognised long before anyone else.\(^{16}\)

Pringle’s typology of editor/intellectuals is a useful one. There is not much doubt that he would have seen his own career mainly in terms of the reactive, Wadsworthian type. He even endorses, at least partially, the attitude of his editor on the *Times*, W F Casey, who ‘disliked theorising and loathed what he called “viewy” writing’ in leaders, and of Geoffrey Dawson, who thought leaders ‘should as far as possible be intelligent explanatory comment on the news in the day’s paper’.\(^{17}\)

When due allowance is made for his reflex self-deprecation, these models of intellectual practice do go some way towards characterising Pringle’s editorship of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He arrived in Sydney, took the measure of the job, and set about understanding and interpreting the issues as they arose, without too many political or cultural preconceptions certainly with nothing like the intensely proactive desire to turn the Australian people into ‘straight thinkers’ that drove Penton’s editorship in the early 1940s.

Even if Pringle had entertained such ambitions — and there is no evidence he did — he could never, under the *Herald’s* management system, have begun to implement them in the holistic way Penton was able to do. Unlike the *Telegraph*, where the editor’s responsibility extended across the whole newspaper, the *Herald* editor was responsible only for the leader page and
review sections of the paper. He had no supervision over news reporting. That was the task of the news editor, who was directly responsible not to the editor but to the management, that is, to Rupert Henderson and (later Sir) Warwick Fairfax, managing director and chairman of the board respectively. The consequence of this was that Pringle, as editor, did not know what was going in the paper on any given night unless the news editor (at this time H G Kippax) told him, and he had no power to change it anyway. It was a situation which he found ‘humiliating and slightly ridiculous ... responsibility without power’, and which he chafed at throughout the term of his first five-year contract. Before agreeing to a second contract some years later he insisted to Henderson’s successor, Angus McLachlan, that he regarded it as ‘absolutely essential that I should have authority over all editorial departments and that the old division between the Editor and the News Editor, and between the leader page and the rest of the paper, should be broken down’.18

Even without those reforms, though, Pringle was willing to continue and intensify the Herald’s attacks on graft and corruption in the Cahill government, and to pursue accusations of police brutality in Sydney to the point of legal jeopardy. On the national scene he initiated contact with B A Santamaria, interviewed him personally, and published the first coherent explanation of the clandestine role of the Movement the day after Evatt’s famous — but for most people at the time, obscure — attack on ‘disloyal and subversive’ elements in the Labor party in October 1954.19

In international affairs, his strong suit, he tested the Herald’s reliably pro-British stance in his sharp early criticism of the ‘recklessness’ of British intervention in the Suez Canal, and its hard-nosed anti-communism, in his early advocacy for diplomatic recognition of mainland China. (He argued, a mere twenty years before it came about, that ‘It is plainly wrong in principle to refuse to recognise as the government of a country the authority which exercises the full powers of government and which has shown that its control is not transitory’.)20

As an editor Pringle responded to issues and opportunities as they arose, analysing and often rearticulating them in terms of a mature and fairly elaborated framework of intellectual convictions and values; but he was not, and perhaps could not have been, an intellectual crusader. In this he was acting substantially in conformity with the ‘reactive’ British liberal tradition of editor-intellectuals as he had seen it embodied in Wadsworth of the Guardian and others. And although, as was conceded earlier, the divided editorial system of the Herald would have made it difficult for him to be a more proactive campaigning editor, still, the nature of the paper’s engagement with public issues did not change greatly during his second five-year stint, 1965-1970, when his editorial authority was at least structurally unimpeded.
In these years, the Vietnam war dominated the political scene, an issue on which Pringle was personally well to the left of Warwick Fairfax, whose support for the American alliance was unwavering throughout. The paper’s editorial line reflected that support throughout Pringle’s second editorship, and he was obliged to pull some of his younger foreign correspondents into line over their critical reporting of the war and support for the anti-war movement in the US.²¹

The situation, in other words, was that while Pringle, with his expanded editorial authority, was able to make some worthwhile changes to the paper — the introduction of a gossip and information column, ‘Data’, by-lines for special writers, improvements in layout and typography — he was now almost as fettered and frustrated by direct proprietorial intervention as he had earlier been by the divided editorship, and many of the minor changes he tried to make were blocked by management.²²

‘Management’, in this context, meant Sir Warwick Fairfax who, since the beginning of 1969, had been managing director as well as chairman of the board in consequence of Angus McLachlan’s illness. Pringle’s relationship with both Rupert Henderson and McLachlan, had been good (though McLachlan had privately expressed concern that he was ‘over-intellectualising’ the Herald as early as 1967),²³ but his relations with Fairfax — never easy — degenerated rapidly from this point, as the disagreements between them multiplied and became irreconcilable. Pringle’s twelve months notice was offered and accepted in December 1969, when an attempt was made to reinstate the divided editorship, and things came to a head just three months later with a long memorandum from Fairfax to Pringle listing a large number of ‘policy lapses’ for which he was responsible as editor, and warning against further deviations. They began with the lack of a religious leader on Good Friday, and included ‘a lack of respect for the Monarchy, a tendency to permissiveness in sexual matters, my attitude to conscientious objectors and the length of national service’.²⁴

Pringle’s verdict on his own career was characteristic:

I lacked all, or almost all, the qualifications required of a good editor. I was not tough. I had no very clear views about the world and society. I was rarely convinced that I was absolutely right. I never learnt to take criticism impersonally.²⁵

Considering the circumstances of his departure from the Herald, one might have expected a more jaundiced view of press proprietors and their role than Pringle ever expressed, at least in print. In fact, while acknowledging the occasional awkwardness in the relations between proprietors and editors he believed there was no realistic alternative for newspaper ownership and control in a capitalist society. And interestingly, while in practical day-to-day terms the editor he most admired was Wadsworth, he names two editor-proprietors,
C P Scott of the *Guardian* and David Astor of the *Observer*, as representing 'the perfect solution'.

Indeed Pringle's terminal difficulties with Warwick Fairfax seem to have had less to do with Fairfax's proprietorship than with the fact that, like Pringle himself, he was an intellectual in a self-consciously elite sense — but an intellectual of an older generation and more conservative views than Pringle. Frank Packer undoubtedly never thought of himself as an intellectual in that sense, and that fact may go far towards explaining the resilience and complementarity of the Penton/Packer alliance; though how much longer it would have lasted, had Penton lived, is another matter.

Pringle was entirely at ease with his composite identity as intellectual and newspaperman. Unlike Penton he seems to have felt little if any dissonance between the two, largely perhaps because the combination was much less unusual in Britain, where there was a strong tradition of an intellectually sophisticated 'quality' press, than in Sydney where no such tradition existed, and where Penton had had to labour mightily to recruit the *Telegraph's* 1940s stable of contributing intellectuals.

Pringle was gracious enough about the quality of the *Herald* at the time of his arrival — 'a decent, honest paper with only occasional deviations into unreason and prejudice' — and felt he had made some genuine and significant improvements to it during his tenure as editor. But he was under no illusions that it was another *Guardian*, *Times* or *Observer*; and it was from working on those papers rather than on the *Herald* that he derived his own comfortable acceptance of his role as a press intellectual. In Australia he mixed socially with writers, artists, and academics in preference to journalists, and when in his memoirs he waxed nostalgic about England what he missed most was 'the conversation of my friends, that characteristic banter, intelligent but not serious, witty and well-informed which is, perhaps, the peculiar contribution of the English intellectual'.

Not surprisingly then, the image of the intellectual appears to have worked rather differently in the journalistic careers of Penton and Pringle. For Penton, it was a form of outward self-signification and a kind of weapon: a public *persona* which he could use to provoke, hector, intimidate and sometimes charm the general reader. For Pringle, by contrast, it corresponded to a strong private sense of who he was, and in his books of essays and memoirs he could 'wear' it as effortlessly and unself-consciously as he did his embroidered regency waistcoats. In the practical implementation of their (in fact, very similar) liberal visions through the limited means available to a daily newspaper — limited particularly in the one case by newsprint rationing and censorship, in the other by fragmented editorial authority and conservative proprietorial pressure — Penton was able (for a short time) to produce what was, on balance, a more intellectually varied, interactive and
‘reader-responsive’ newspaper than Pringle. Yet it was probably Pringle who formulated the editorial creed that underpinned these strategies most memorably (Penton, it has to be said, did not always preach what he practised):

It is more important to be reasonable than to be right ... In a democracy a newspaper may be doing a useful service if it argues, fairly and logically, a view which may subsequently prove to be wrong. What is important is that there should be other papers arguing different views. An editor is not God: he is part of the democratic process by which a nation argues and blunders its way towards the truth.29

For Paul Kelly, special writer and former editor-in-chief of the Australian, that degree of uncertainty (the title of his third book notwithstanding) might be asking a little too much.

Paul Kelly

Paul Kelly started his career with the Australian in 1971. After that he spent some years with the Fairfax press (the National Times), before returning to the Murdoch flagship as national affairs editor in Canberra. In 1991 he was made editor-in-chief, a position he filled with distinction until late in 1996, when he became the paper’s international editor.

Kelly was four years old when Brian Penton died; he has never worked for the Packer press; and his acknowledged models and mentors appear to provide no direct links to the legacy of Penton’s Telegraph. In personality the two men seem as remote from one another as they are in time: Kelly’s manner is quiet, reserved and deliberate rather than loud and hectoring in the notorious Penton style. Yet for all this Kelly seems much closer to Penton than to Pringle, and is in some significant ways surprisingly ‘Pentonian’ in his political orientation and economic views. (Remarkably, across a distance of more than half a century, from 1943 to 1996, they even cite the same German managerial theorist, Peter Drucker, in support of their not dissimilar analyses of Australian capitalism).30

Kelly’s credentials as an intellectual, even by the narrower definitions of that term, can hardly be questioned. As the author of four serious books of political history and policy analysis — two of them published and another repackaged during his tenure as editor-in-chief — he is the most productive of the three in terms of scholarly publication. Few Australian journalists with comparable bodies of independent scholarship to their credit — Gavin Long, Sidney Baker, or Gavin Souter, for example — have also served as editor of a metropolitan or national daily.31

Kelly is nevertheless uncomfortable with ‘intellectual’ as a self-descriptive term, and sees it as slightly alien to both traditional Australian egalitarianism
and journalistic pragmatism. For him the image of the journalist as intellectual is very much a feature of the British press, much less so of the Australian press — a perception Penton and Pringle would both have endorsed. Unlike them, however, he identifies closely with the image of the ‘knockabout Australian’ and is sardonic about the freedom with which the ‘intellectual’ label is adopted and applied in British culture generally, and the press in particular. He is in some respects a more straightforward Australian nationalist than either Penton or Pringle were. This is reflected in the strongly pro-republican stance the newspaper adopted when the issue of an Australian republic was first placed on the political agenda by Paul Keating during the 1993 federal election, and which, to its credit, it has maintained in face of the Howard government’s fairly frank reluctance to carry the issue forward.\textsuperscript{32}

Kelly’s nationalism does not, however, include much sympathy for the leftism of the ‘radical nationalist’ tradition, at least in matters of economic policy. His vision of Australia’s economic future is firmly tied to the current global ascendancy of what he calls ‘economic liberalism’, from which he envisages no likely deviation:

There is nothing inevitable about the further advance of economic liberalism in Australia. But if my speculation is right then this period of tight budgets, the user-pays principle, privatisation, deregulation, low inflation, public financial accountability and more competitive markets will be with us for a long time; the course of economic reform in Australia has a considerable distance to run and the journey is sure to be turbulent.\textsuperscript{33}

Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, these views, and the ‘smaller government’ doctrine they imply — for Kelly ‘the remarkable [postwar] age of faith in government ... is now in manifest decline’ — co-exist with an insistence on the need for ‘strong leadership’ in government, ostensibly to ensure stability and ‘fairness’ in the society.

Kelly’s views on social policy, and those of the Australian’s leaders during his tenure, have been somewhat to the left of his views on economics, and generally in line with the Keating government’s key policy directions: they include support for Aboriginal reconciliation, for equal opportunity in employment and education, and for a vigorous multiculturalism fed by sustained high levels of immigration. The last of these issues recently gave rise to a review article by Kelly on Samuel P Huntington’s The Clash of Civilisations, disputing its pessimistic prognosis for Australia’s attempts at cultural rapprochement with Asia.\textsuperscript{34} A fuller, also critical treatment of the same thesis appeared the following week in The Australian’s Review of Books — a fact that seems to bespeak a degree of intellectual coordination across publications which is reminiscent of the Packer press in its better years.\textsuperscript{35}
But for Kelly the values that bind his views on various issues together are individual freedom and national prosperity, particularly the latter; for it sometimes seems, in Kelly’s later writing, as if the freedom he most prizes is simply the freedom to contribute to national prosperity. Republicanism, multiculturalism, an anti-discriminatory immigration policy, even Aboriginal reconciliation, all converge, ‘at the end of the day’, as ways of profiling Australia most attractively for the Asian market. In sharp contrast to Pringle, whose liberalism was primarily a matter of defining and seeking to achieve the social and political arrangements most likely to enhance the quality of personal life and cultural experience, Kelly’s liberalism is a form of economic corporatism, from which ‘quality of life’ seems largely absent, or at least taken for granted as an unproblematical effect of continuing prosperity.

A key index of the extent to which Kelly or any other practising intellectual stands for ‘freedom’ in a substantive rather than symbolic sense is perhaps their attitude to the higher education system within which, if anywhere, fundamental critiques of existing social arrangements and national priorities are likely to be elaborated. Kelly seems, on the whole, less convinced of the value or importance of that critical function for universities than either Pringle or Penton, seeing them either as part of the recreational ‘safety net’ needed to entertain the casualties of economic liberalism on the march, or as direct contributors, via privately funded and narrowly targeted research, to the achievement of national economic goals. In this respect, Kelly is in line both with federal government education policies since the Dawkins reforms, and with dominant ways of thinking within the universities themselves.

He is in line too, broadly speaking, with the thinking of his proprietor Rupert Murdoch. Here the similarity with Penton and the dissimilarity with Pringle is most marked. From the beginning of his tenure, Kelly operated on the basis of a fully articulated ‘editorial position’ agreed in prior discussion between himself and Murdoch, which ‘gave [him] the confidence to proceed with a clear policy framework for leaders’. This framework was defined, as Kelly explains it, without reference to ‘party-political’ positions, and embraced such goals as the modernisation, deregulation and globalisation of Australian industries. It supported tariff reduction, high savings and sustainable growth and was sceptical of government intervention in the economy. In social policy it looked to the elimination of ‘middle-class welfare’ and the ‘entitlement mentality’ as manifested, for example, in expectations of universal health care benefits and free tertiary education.

In principle, Kelly has insisted on the editor’s ‘primary responsibility ... to his own publication’, but this responsibility falls well short of untrammelled editorial autonomy. In 1994 he wrote:
The editor does not own the newspaper. He runs the paper in trust on behalf of the proprietor. While the editor should champion his own view of the paper his position is viable only when he retains the confidence of the proprietor/board/chief executive.\textsuperscript{38}

If, within this sometimes tense relationship, an editor is asked to ‘compromise too much’, then ‘it is time management appointed a replacement’ — not time, be it noted, for the editor to resign. (Penton would I think have been more comfortable with that definition of management prerogative than Pringle.) For Kelly, the whole question of media ownership — fifteen-year old debates about ‘how Kerry Packer or Rupert Murdoch were dictating the political news’ — is ‘much less important than before’. If this is so, it may be largely because the functions, responsibilities and interests of the editor, in Kelly’s account, are now less distinct from those of the proprietor than they used to be, at least in recent years.

Just such a convergence between editor and proprietor made the Australian of the early 1990s, like the Daily Telegraph of the the early 1940s, a powerful media instrument for conferring intellectual coherence and cogency on a range of political positions, and (in the case of the Australian) marshalling a national readership behind a program of ‘reforms’ the short-term consequences of which seem to be envisaged with much more clarity and detail than the long-term ones. And because, like Penton, Kelly had the authority Pringle never had to innovate freely in all departments of the newspaper, he introduced a number of new elements, including a daily features page, a daily op-ed page, a weekly obituary page (‘Time and Tide’), and the initially maligned (but now firmly established) monthly review lift-out, The Australian’s Review of Books.\textsuperscript{39} He also continued the policy (established by his predecessor David Armstrong) of having at least one ‘rogue’ weekend columnist from the left, though the replacement of a radical environmentalist, Ian Lowe, with a radical historian and economic analyst, Humphrey McQueen, probably reflected his preferred priorities. In these and other ways, Kelly presided over a phase in the history of the national daily in which a significant range of opinions could be expressed, though not with equal weight and always within the very strongly marked parameters of national growth and prosperity.

Central to Kelly’s conception of the editor’s role is what he once called ‘crusading zeal’; but that zeal is deployed less against power and privilege than against pockets of inertia and of resistance, whether from the left or the right, to the sweep of continuing modernisation on economic rationalist lines. ‘The challenge of the 1990s’, he observed in 1992, was ‘to find a new orthodoxy for the future, one which marries compassion and competition’.\textsuperscript{40} The challenge for Kelly’s style of editor is to give that orthodoxy the credibility and legitimacy it needs in order to have its full transformative impact on Australian society.
Conclusions

Comparing editor-intellectuals systematically across such a range of contexts is very difficult. But there is some value in mere juxtaposition if it helps us to imagine the different social and political circumstances in which intellectuals have tried to make their presence felt in Australian society during and since the war. But there may also be a pattern of sorts to be detected in the series of three journalistic careers just described, a pattern suggesting that historical periods engender the kinds of intellectuals they need. Penton and Kelly both made what might be described (and often was in Penton’s case) as significant compromises of their intellectual freedom in order to be part of a team that ‘got things done’. Both confessed to a consuming interest in the workings of power, and reserved their greatest admiration for individuals in public life (whether it be Billy Hughes, Ted Theodore or Paul Keating) who also got things done, regardless of ideology.

Penton was working at a time of massive world transformations and widespread insecurity; a time when well-planned but decisive actions were needed if potentially disastrous confusion and demoralisation were to be avoided. His own anecdotes of these years highlight such moments, and prescriptions for ‘straight thinking’ and ‘democratic propaganda’ were, as much as anything, emergency wartime substitutes for the more leisurely cultivation of wisdom and civic responsibility that were no longer adequate or even possible.

The 1980s and early 1990s have seen no world conflict on the scale of the 1940s, but as the title of Kelly’s magnum opus — _The End of Certainty_ — suggests, Australia and the world have undergone, in this period, a continuing crisis of political upheaval, social uncertainty and — above all — of technological and cultural transformation unlike anything since the war years. That, at least, is one scenario for the present and recent past, and if it lacks the self-evident indisputability of the earlier crisis, the modernising, future-oriented, ‘runs-on-the-board’ ethos promoted by News Limited makes sense from that perspective. Kelly has played a crucial role in linking that ethos to a range of liberal social policies, softening its hard economic edges by forging what appear to be close links with several shibboleths of the educated middle class: multiculturalism, republicanism and reconciliation. Whether those links survive a term or more of conservative government remains to be seen.

Pringle, far more than Penton, seems at this moment in history to represent a departed option. No less global in his perspectives than the other two, his vision lacks the urgency and the strategic ‘all of a piece-ness’ that Penton and Kelly continually seek. The fundamental coherence of Pringle’s thinking was open and reflective, broadly cultural rather than programmatic, as it could afford to be in the Australia of the 1950s and early 1960s. When confronted
by the threats and challenges of the late 1960s the strains began to show, not only in the relationship with Sir Warwick Fairfax but also in his relations with the _Herald_ 'team' and with the job itself. Pringle’s relaxed brand of liberal editorship may no longer serve our turn, but at least it left a respected space for fundamental dissent and for pursuing policy options outside the declared necessities of the global future. It is not clear that the liberalism of either Penton or Kelly could ultimately claim as much.