

Macdougall, James Claude (Jim) (1903-1995)

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MACDOUGALL, JAMES CLAUDE (JIM) (1903–1995), journalist, was born on 25 August 1903 in Brisbane, third son of Dugald Graeme Macdougall, a Victorian-born journalist, and his Queensland-born wife Mary, née Ryan. After the family moved to Melbourne, Jim attended Wesley College (1917–19), then spent some happy years jackarooing on a property in the Riverina owned by (Sir) George Fairbairn [q.v.8], a friend of his father. In 1923 his father showed another prominent acquaintance, (Sir) Keith Murdoch [q.v.10], a poem his son had composed while droving sheep, on the strength of which Murdoch hired him in 1924 as a cadet reporter on the Melbourne *Herald*.

Impressed by Macdougall's eye for a good story, Murdoch sent him to the *Herald's* London bureau for two years to gain experience. At the end of 1926 he returned to Melbourne, to be met by a request from Murdoch that he move in with and keep a watchful eye on the poet C. J. Dennis [q.v.8], then a *Herald* columnist and drinking heavily. He shared 'Den's' flat for several months. Macdougall made Australian radio-broadcasting history on 25 August 1927, when his interview from Melbourne with a subject in Sydney was transmitted live in both cities.

On 5 August 1932 at Scots Church, Melbourne, after a six-week courtship, Macdougall married Olive Conway MacKnight, daughter of Conway MacKnight, a leading Albury surgeon. Soon afterwards, he resigned from the *Herald* and the newlyweds sailed for Britain. They travelled extensively on the Continent. Leaving his wife and infant son to sail home ahead of him, in early 1934 he cycled across Nazi Germany with Ronald Hughes-Jones, a journalist friend from Melbourne. In Vienna in May, Macdougall interviewed Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, the composer Franz Léhar, and the actor Emil Jannings. He then journeyed alone to the Balkans, where he worked briefly on the English-language *South Slav Herald* (Belgrade), and languished in prison for two days in Skopje, for a passport violation.

Olive Macdougall returned to Australia in August 1934 and Jim in September. For about a year, they lived in Sydney, from where he

freelanced. She had brought a breeding pair of Dalmatians and a cocker spaniel from Britain. A few months later the dogs were joined by what was said to be the first Afghan hound imported into Australia. The couple established studs, breeding, exhibiting, and selling pedigreed dogs, an enthusiasm they shared for the rest of their lives.

By 1936 Macdougall was working as a sub-editor and occasional feature-writer for the Melbourne *Star*. Moving back to Sydney in 1937, he was a sub-editor then pictorial editor of (Sir) Frank Packer's [q.v.15] *Daily Telegraph*. In 1941, having been rejected for military service because of a bleeding ulcer, he transferred to the *Sun*, where his daily column, 'Contact', was launched on 18 February 1946; it was one of the first American-style, front-page features in Australian newspapers.

'Contact' was the perfect expression of Macdougall's personality, reflecting (as a rival acknowledged) his 'sunny and gregarious disposition' (McNicoll 1979, 119). Widely plundered for individual items by provincial and interstate columnists, it was typically a series of half a dozen or more paragraphs of society gossip, business and political news, humorous or appealing stories, and whimsical one-liners. Although he sometimes referred to the sagacity of his father and his own exotic adventures in early life, his staple source and subject was, as he put it, 'the brain, the wit and the wisdom of the people of Sydney' (Verlander 1990, 4), from whom, at the peak of his career, he was receiving nearly 1,000 letters and phone calls every week. He often used his column, in turn, to highlight individual cases of hardship or injustice, and to lend his support to charitable causes.

After John Fairfax & Sons Pty Ltd took over the *Sun* in 1953, Macdougall had to resist pressure from the new editor, Lindsay Clinch [q.v.17], to use his column to 'start kicking people in the guts' (McNicoll 1979, 249). Eventually, in 1956, he migrated, with 'Contact', to the front (later back) page of the *Daily Telegraph*. The move was marked by the first appearance of his distinctive puckish caricature, with big spectacles, long nose, abundant black hair, and stylish buttonhole. Resentment at his and others' recent rough

treatment by Fairfax's management made him agree to write two paragraphs sharply critical of the firm's corporate behaviour and journalistic standards; he had to defend his own integrity in the public hostilities that ensued between the two newspapers.

At the height of his popularity, in 1961 Macdougall joined the *Daily Mirror*, where his column appeared seven days a week (*Sunday Mirror* included)—with a new title, 'Town Talk'. He called it his 'corner of warmth in the paper' (White 1995, 62). His readers agreed and he became 'perhaps Australia's best-known columnist' (*Newspaper News* 1966, 11), with an uncanny knack—often credited to either his 'crystal ball' or 'my spotted dog' (White 1995, 13)—for accurately predicting honours awards, senior political appointments, and Archibald prize winners. He was appointed OBE (1969) and elevated to CBE (1974) for services to journalism.

Though he officially retired at the end of 1974, Macdougall worked (1975–91) for Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd, writing a weekly column in the *Australian*, 'Jim Macdougall's Cathay'; the title was soon changed to 'Jim Macdougall's Cathay Advertisement' (later 'Commercial'). During these years he also contributed a regular column to the *North Shore Times*. He died on 25 August 1995 in his house at Lindfield, Sydney, and was cremated. His wife and son survived him.

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