

Memories of Murray

Murray Nicoll told stories in a way people would never forget. Sharon Smith recalls a gifted teacher and colleague. Photos of memorabilia by Allison Hernach

Murray Nicoll: July 20, 1943 – May 2, 2010

Tucked into his old-fashioned New Zealand press pass was a black-and-white passport-sized photo and a narrow slip of yellow newsprint. In single column type, it was called “The Rules of Reporting”, from a Robert Ruark novel called *The Honey Badger*. It was more than just a cutting; it was a credo.

Murray Nicoll got his credentials as a reporter in the early 1960s. He started as a 16-year-old copy boy on the New Zealand *Evening Post*, after getting the job “accidentally”.

His wife, Franke, says Murray – or Nic, as his mates knew him – was brought up on the old ways of reporting. “In those days you started by sweeping the floor,” she said. “You learned to smoke and you learned to booze but you actually learned about ideas and ethics.” During the course of his career some of those “old ways” changed dramatically, but Murray’s dedication to ethics and principles did not.

I first heard Murray on one of the blackest days of South Australian history – Ash Wednesday, February 16, 1983. Murray and Franke had stopped off in Adelaide on their way to Canada in the late 1960s and never left. He’d moved from newspapers to television and then radio, during the halcyon days of 5DN. They had made their home in the tiny town of Greenhill, perched on the edge of the Adelaide Hills yet tantalisingly close to the city.

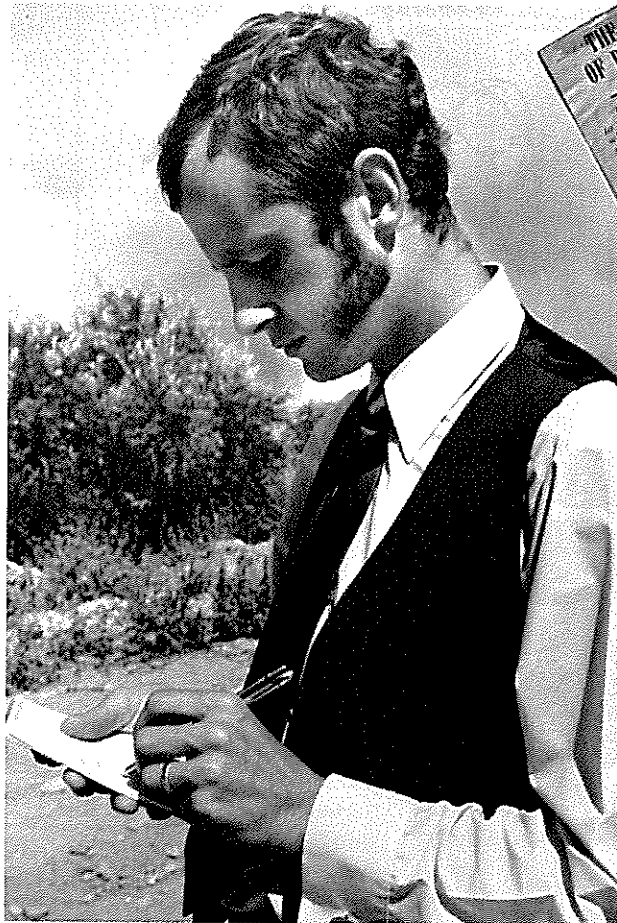
Like thousands of others, I heard Murray broadcast live from his home, describing the rapacious spread of the fire. It was the report of a lifetime and earned him a Walkley Award – Murray’s lucid yet impassioned account of his own house burning down. It was also number one on Ruark’s list of rules: “Don’t write what you don’t know.”

I first laid eyes on Murray as a journalism student a few years later, at what was then the Magill College of Advanced Education. He wore a khaki flak jacket covered with pockets and in each pocket was a gadget, a spare or a back-up – all the paraphernalia for on-the-road reporting in radio.

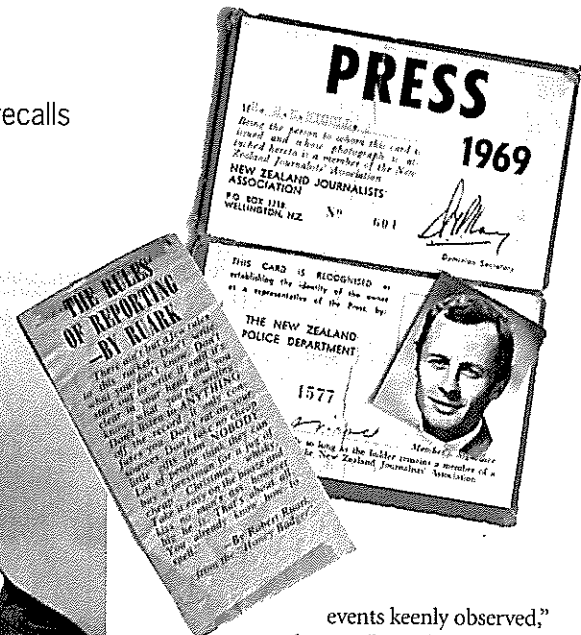
He confessed to being an introvert who had learned to overcome his shyness. I knew that if he could do it, there was hope for me. He shared his wisdom with us aspiring journos, perhaps straight from Ruark’s rules: “Don’t listen to anything off the record, it only confuses you. Don’t rat on your sources. Don’t take no cheap little gifts from *nobody*.”

Not many of us get the chance to work with our idol, as I did. After a career in radio (earning a second Walkley for his broadcast from Mount Everest), a stint at the ABC and another at ATSIIC, Murray went to Seven News in Adelaide.

News director Terry Plane says Murray was the consummate storyteller. “He’d get away with giving his personal impressions of things, but they were



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events keenly observed,” he says. “I used to stand here watching the bulletin some nights and I would just laugh out loud watching Murray’s stories – he had great lines in so many of them.”

I was chief-of-staff and sub the day Murray was rostered for his first reporting shift. No-one told me that Murray had his own way of writing a TV story – one that defied convention but could reach the viewer and take them on a journey like no-one else could. After arguing about what could and should be in a TV news story that day, we became great mates. I didn’t know it, but another of Ruark’s rules was at play here, but in reverse: “...kiss no man’s ass, however big he is.” Though he was my hero and a legend, Murray treated me as his equal.

Plane also remembers Murray’s great respect for his colleagues: “He was one of those people who got on well with the rest of the team – he loved what camera operators could do for his stories, loved what editors did for his stories, loved what graphics did for his stories – he thought they were weaving magic.”

None of us in the newsroom will ever forget seeing the images of Murray walking across the ailing River Murray in his waders. The

man and the river, its plight and its people will for us remain indelibly linked. Murray was more than a reporter. He was more than a storyteller, and Franke says that, for him, journalism was more than just a job. “It was a calling,” she says. “It was a vocation. That’s just the way it was.”

Says Plane: “He had no airs. He certainly had graces, but he had no airs. He was a big loss.”

In the year since his death, no-one has even tried to take Murray’s place in the Seven newsroom. We all know it would be futile. In those five years before leukaemia took him we witnessed a master at work, and Ruark’s rules being practised with precision: “That’s about all. You already know how to spell.” I reckon Ruark would have been proud.

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