I am a genuine Depression child, born according to a reliable family tradition around three o'clock of the afternoon on Thursday, 5 November 1931. This piece of oral testimony is corroborated by an advertisement in the following morning's *West Australian*:

Bolton (nee Ransley). On November 5, to Frank and Win at Nurse Harvey's Hospital, Bulwer-street, Perth, a son (Geoffrey Curgenven). Both well.

In a lifetime marked by a sufficient appetite for publicity it is the only occasion on which my name has appeared at the top of the first column on the front page of the State's leading morning newspaper; and although this was partly because my surname begins with an early letter of the alphabet it was largely because *The West Australian* for many years devoted its front page to advertisements, reserving the major news items for the centre pages. In this it followed the London *Times*, appropriately enough since Western Australia still looked to the United Kingdom for its cultural models. The layout of the Western Australian press in the 1930s followed the model of the more conservative London newspapers, or more precisely substantial provincial dailies such as the *Yorkshire Post*. This was true not only of the *West Australian*, but its metropolitan contemporaries the afternoon *Daily News*, the weekly *Western Mail*, and the weekend papers, the *Sunday Times*, the *Mirror*, and the *Call*.

There were as yet no tabloids, and nothing equivalent to the London *Daily Mirror*. Nearly all stories were reported in single-column prose with three short headlines summarising the story below, as in:

"SHOOT THEN!"

Retort Courageous

Woman to Bandit
The Daily News on the afternoon of my birth had an unusually important story, having secured advance notice of the forthcoming Ottawa conference which would seek to weld the British Commonwealth into a stronger trading partnership by encouraging British purchases of primary products from the dominions and Australian (or Canadian or South African) preference for British manufactures:

The Biggest Scheme in our History

Empire economists unity project

Biggest move in imperial history

Developments expected shortly

In a community of British migrants and the children of British migrants it was natural that British news should figure much more prominently than it does today. More than half the leading stories featured around the day of my birth had a British provenance. Ramsay Macdonald was selecting his new national government, and when he visited his native town of Lossiemouth the Scots fisherfolk greeted him with such enthusiasm that they dragged his car with ropes through the main street. Lord Kylsant, a business man convicted of fraud, would require a special bed for his 6 feet 5 inches frame while he served a year in Wormwood Scrubs and would be obliged to clean his own cell. Lord Tennyson had been scolded by the Daily Sketch for calling Don Bradman a publicity-hunter. And there was still an Empire, though already a troubled one. In Cyprus the traders in a revolt were to be deported for life after burning down Government House. Tribal unrest was feared on the North-West Frontier: Waziristan was a "volcano". Such stories gained equal prominence with the news that Japan, having occupied Manchuria, was defying League of Nations requests for evacuation.

Of course the depression was a preoccupation, though none of the contemporary newspapers gives any very lively impression of hardship and suffering in the Perth community. Such stories became commoner in 1932 and 1933 when it became evident that the depression would not suddenly go away. Hope still flickered in November 1931; the Daily News carried a report of a sudden rise in wheat prices on the Chicago wheat market due to an absence of competitive shipments from the Soviet Union. Experts claimed that this marked the end of the depression. (They were wrong.) A harassed Labor prime minister, J.H. Scullin was launching a fortnight-long National Prosperity Campaign to stimulate the economy. The Wheatgrowers' Union was threatening to defy the federal government by holding up the harvest. An even stronger sense of déjà vu overcomes the reader who turns back a few weeks and finds both parties in State parliament combining to berate a federal Labor government for hitting at the gold industry by cutting an export subsidy.

Nor were politicians respected any more in 1931 than in 1986. The Sunday
Times wrote cryptically of 'a soapbox orator who was elevated to a position carrying £1500 a year and subsequently “Fired” when a change of Government occurred but when the political wheel turned again got a fat billet to buy plenty of luxuries'. A baffling tale for those not in the know, but it served to feed the populist view that all politicians are crooks. The Daily News was up in arms at the proposal by the Deputy-Premier, to alienate a portion of Kings Park for a new public hospital. “HANDS OFF KINGS PARK” thundered an editorial on 21 October 1931, concluding in language which could apply equally today: ‘There is a tendency in these unrelenting days for . . . things to be done “under the lap” in the belief that public agitation will die quickly’. A fortnight later another Daily News editorial wrote of the Legislative Assembly:

Every minute that members are talking costs the country something over £1, it has been computed. On vital business that expenditive may be necessary, but some few pounds sterling were sent down the drain of futility yesterday and the people should not let such occasions go by without recording censure.

Indeed not, comments the reader; and if in these days of computerised technology the Legislative Assembly could be equipped with a tally-screen indicating the amount of public money consumed while Mr Burke and Mr Hassell are exchanging pleasantries . . . But perhaps we had better get back to the press in the early 1930s.

The life of working journalists in this era has been vividly described by two of their number, Sir Paul Hasluck and Victor Courtney. 1 Both portray a world in which, as Hasluck puts it, ‘The literary staff was the aristocracy of a newspaper. The advertising staff and the business manager’s staff were not nearly as influential as they have become in more recent times’. It comes as a telling comment on changing public taste to find on the second page of the Daily News for 7 November 1931 a whole column headed:

**TO PERFECTION**

*Goethe’s Way*

*Boundless Disinterest*

It must be many years since the Daily News gave so much coverage to Goethe — or Foucault or Wole Soyinka. Yet it was clearly not aiming at the highbrow readership. The front page was largely given over to sporting results, with horse-racing at the fore followed by boxing and cricket (or, in winter, Australian rules). None of the major metropolitan papers boasted a cartoonist, although the Daily News and the Sunday Times each ran a single comic strip: ‘Us Fellers’, the forerunner of Ginger Meggs in the Sunday Times, and in the Daily News ‘Pop’ — a rather whimsical offshoot of upper middle-class England, its bold paterfamilias hero forever falling into scrapes with large ladies in tea-gowns and Bright Young Things. I don’t know the secret of its appeal to Western Australian readers, but it lasted for ages.
Coverage achieved on the whole a successful balance between overseas news and local stories. Readers relied on the Western Australian for the doings of outer suburban councils as for the League of Nations. Court cases seem to have possessed an element of theatre in them which justified extensive reporting; not only major murder trials in which distinguished local barristers displayed their prowess, but also homelier matters. All the newspapers around the date of my birth give a good deal of space to a slander case from the Southern Cross district when one farmer's wife was alleged to have said of another that she couldn't possibly afford all her dresses out of the egg-money, but would probably have less now that a certain neighbouring farmer had moved out of the district. All the names were given, as well as remarkably candid descriptions of the witnesses ('a wizened, elderly man', 'a plain, gruffly-spoken middle-aged woman'). The Sunday Times for its part was given to a rather unpleasant form of anonymous mischief-making hinting at suburban adulteries. ('They say that a certain Fremantle businessman has not claimed the umbrella with his initials which he left at a seaside hotel while staying in a double room last weekend.') No doubt readers found this kind of thing titillating. Perth was in many ways still a big country town.

The West Australian still stood at the head of Perth journalism, although it had recently passed out of local ownership. Sir Winthrop Hackett, editor and part-proprietor for a generation, had bought out his partners before his death in 1916. His estate was administered for a decade by his successor as editor, Sir Alfred Langler, who sold out in 1926 to a public company with a capital of £550,000 in which the Melbourne Herald had the dominant shareholding. This made no immediate difference to the tone or policies of the West Australian under Langler's successor as editor, Dudley Braham, an Oxford-educated Englishman who had once been foreign correspondent for The Times. Under Langler and Braham the West Australian maintained Hackett's policy of seeking scrupulous standards of accuracy and objectivity in reportage while following a conservative line in politics. But not obsequiously conservative; the days had been when the West fancied itself a little as a king-maker in the anti-Labor politics of the State, and it was not above rapping even Sir James Mitchell over the knuckles if his actions smacked too much of slapdash planning or party expediency. Nor was the West Australian given to sensation-mongering; its restrained prose at times must have helped to take the heat out of potentially tense situations such as the demonstrations by unemployed workers in the early 1930s.

During the 1920s the West Australian acquired its evening competitor the Daily News. Editorial comment in the Daily News tended to focus on local issues, and perhaps its staff were a little less scrupulous about impartiality. Thus a report of a Sydney fracas in which the New Guard broke up a Communist meeting convened to protest against the eviction of tenants was headlined 'Up Guards and at 'em!' and prominence without disapproval seems to have been given to accounts of violent anti-Communist vigilante action in North America. The third mainstay of Western Australian Newspapers was the Western Mail, published weekly since 1885 and directed at a rural readership. A sixty-four page broadsheet, it carried repeats of news stories carried in the West Australian during the previous week, but its distinctive features
included several pages of useful information for farmers, a women's section
with recipes and other instructive material, a children's section and selected
fiction. In short, the Western Mail played an invaluable role in disseminating
educational material to rural communities. It also contained an eight page
centrefold with photographs of local activities which today constitute a useful
resource for social historians. One regular feature was a series of snapshots
citizens photographed walking in St George's Terrace, whose friends derived
an artless pleasure from seeing somebody of their acquaintance in the media.

Only the Sunday Times could boast a circulation comparable to the West Australian. Founded in 1897 as a populist, 'tothersider' rival to the conservative 'sandgroper' West, the Sunday Times in its early years built up a reputation for muckraking journalism of a somewhat indiscriminate nature. It was widely blamed for hounding C.Y. O'Connor to his suicide, and was forever sniffing out tales of graft and corruption in official circles. By 1931 it was long past its prime, with an ageing staff and a proprietor, James McCallum Smith, who with monomaniac intensity preached the secession of Western Australia from the Commonwealth. Faint traces of the old populism lingered in its contempt for most politicians, but much of its reforming zeal was lost in a trenchant anti-socialism.

Several other weekly papers sprang up to seize the lost ground. Victor
Courtney, a young journalist who gained his training on the Sunday Times,
teamed up with J.J. ('Boss') Simons, director of the Young Australia League
in 1919 to purchase a small weekly, the Sportsman devoted to racing, trotting,
and minor sports and theatricals. Simons, a strong anti-conscriptionist, was
Labor MLA for East Perth in 1921-22 but broke with the party; however
he and Courtney were decidedly less conservative in their editorial policies
than either the Sunday Times or the West Australian so they expanded the
scope of the Sportsman to cover general local news, renamed it the Call,
and became a crusading journal which soon attracted libel suits from the
mayor of Perth and other notables. Four years later they took over another
struggling weekly, the Mirror, which filled the need for a popular Saturday
night publication. 'It was not a good paper' Courtney later admitted, 'but
it was a paper with the news and it was the news dished out in a breezy
fashion while the entertainment angle of news presentation was kept well
in mind'. It was a portent for the future.

The early 1930s were a watershed for Perth's newspapers. Courtney dated
the change to the advent of the Audit Bureau of Circulations. This gave
advertisers and their agents access to the audited sales of every major newspaper.
'To put it plainly, most advertisers support the papers that appeal to the
masses and the masses are not all university students or professional men.'
To Hasluck at the West Australian the change was heralded by the arrival
of the Melbourne Herald's C.P. Smith as managing editor, who supervised
the paper's move to a new building and streamlined managerial practices which
'tended to change a club into a factory. The supremacy of the editor in fixing
the contents of the paper was reduced to a share in the fixing.'

New media were also flourishing. In 1932 there were only two Perth radio
stations, 6WF, acquired from Westralian Farmers by the newly formed
Australian Broadcasting Commission and 6ML, the solitary commercial
station, owned by Musgroves, the music retailers. During the next decade they were joined by 6PR, owned by Musgroves' competitors Nicholsons, 6IX, a second Musgroves station, 6PM, offshoot of a Northam operator, and 6KY owned by the Australian Labor Party, as well as a second ABC station, 6WN. In 1933 the *West Australian* launched a weekly journal, the *Broadcaster*, which not only published local radio programmes and features about radio personalities, but also maintained a cartoonist Clive Gordon, and provided a forum where local short story writers could earn a few guineas and an outlet for their work. The *Western Mail* was also opened to local writers. At the same time the *Daily News* went down-market. Its layout assumed several tabloid features. An opinion column was developed in which correspondents voiced their views in capsules of not more than one hundred words. The number of comic strips increased; Pop was joined by the space traveller Brick Bradford, Popeye the Sailor, and eventually Blondie and Dagwood.

The *West Australian*, to external appearances, remained the same dignified, conservative, responsible, slightly old-fashioned journal as before, and its editor during the 1930s, H.J. Lambert, was a product of the Langler school. Hasluck however believed that the shift to the ownership of a joint stock company was producing undesirable changes:

> The space given to book reviews, criticism, and discussion of literary topics was related to the number of readers or advertising they attracted. Satisfying the shareholders took a higher place than responsibility to the public. Senior appointments were made with an eye to producing better dividends rather than a better newspaper. Circulation became more and more the yardstick by which to measure whether a piece of journalism was good or bad, and professional skill and probity took second place to any talent that improved circulation.4

Given the economic constraints of the depressed 1930s it would not have been wonderful to find the accountants and advertising managers taking a more assertive role in newspaper decision-making. The same constraints affected the weekend press. During 1932 the *Mirror* and the *Sunday Times* responded by initiating a series of crossword puzzle competitions in which entrants had to submit sixpence with their entries and the winner was awarded a prize of several hundred, or even a few thousand pounds. Circulation of both journals throve, but the churches attacked the crossword puzzle craze as an incentive to gambling and bookmakers complained that they were losing customers. The Mitchell government decided to divert the proceeds of gambling to government revenue by legislating in 1932 to outlaw the newspaper crossword contest and to set up a lotteries commission which would conduct regular draws, with the proceeds going to nominated charities. This put the weekend newspapers at odds with the Mitchell government. (The *Sunday Times* was already disenchanted because of what it saw as Mitchell's lukewarm attitude towards secession.) The controversy helped to increase the government's unpopularity and may have contributed to its landslide defeat in April 1933.

The ageing McCallum Smith, obsessed with fostering secession, was ready to sell the *Sunday Times* and in 1934 entered into negotiations with the *West Australian*. These failed to reach fruition, and Simons and Courtney intervened
with an offer of £55,000. McCallum Smith saw nothing incongruous about selling to anti-secessionists or in accepting the chairmanship of directors of the new company. He insisted only that the *Sunday Times* should remain neutral on the question for twelve months. The fire soon went out of the secession issue, and in 1937 when Carlyle Ferguson attempted to start a secessionist paper with the memorable name of the *Daily Groper* it went out of business in less than a fortnight. Courtney and Simons in fact reverted to a moderately anti-Labor stance for most of the 1930s, and Courtney even stood as an independent UAP candidate at a by-election for the Legislative Council in 1941 but fell into dispute with the National Union, the anti-Labor funding organization, and during the Second World War became Perth’s main source of media support for the Curtin government. Old friendship played a part here, as Curtin had edited the *Westralian Worker* during its heyday in the 1920s when its political comment and cartoons matched in quality anything produced by the mainstream press.

During the later 1920s Courtney and Simons reorganised the three newspapers under their ownership. The *Call* reverted to being primarily a sporting newspaper and the *Sunday Times* took over most of its popular features, dropping many of the farming columns and other unglamorous portions of its magazine section which had competed rather ineffectually with the *Western Mail*. The *Mirror* increasingly found its customers among Saturday afternoon football and racing crowds and Saturday night fans of the ‘trots’ or the cinema. For a while during the mid-1930s it made something of a feature of reprinting human interest stories from the overseas press. In one edition at the height of the Munich crisis of September 1938, for instance, there are a few trivial local stories — a burglary at a plumber’s home from which nothing was taken, a complaint of inadequate afternoon tea at the Victoria League, a farm suicide — but most of the material is taken straight from the lower middle-class English press: poisonings, deaths of wealthy recluses, centenarians receiving royal telegrams, a youth cured of lockjaw, none of them stories obviously of concern to the people of Perth.

But the *Mirror* gradually won itself a peculiar relevance for Perth readers. It came to specialise in divorce reports and other delicious sexual scandals, and its illustrations of scantily-clad girls, while innocuous enough to the eyes of the 1980s, were sufficiently provocative to debar the paper from many respectable households. Its sub-editors developed a line in jolly headlines: ‘Butcher was in for his Chop’, ‘Roving Romeo Routed’. Like many other newspapers of the same sort, the *Mirror* represented itself as a custodian of morality exposing the vices of the iniquitous to public scrutiny; but in fact it was simply pandering to the insatiable human taste for prurient scandal. It represented one end of the spectrum of Perth’s press while at the other end the good, grey *West Australian*, however diminished, still maintained the literate standards of a journal which included Walter Murdoch among its columnists and sometimes invited academics from the University of Western Australia to compose its editorials.

Then in 1939 the Second World War broke out. Newsprint rationing was to lead to the disappearance of many time-honoured features. Reliance on radio for news and entertainment, and particularly the emergence of the ABC...
news bulletins as a yardstick for accurate reporting, meant that the newspapers would never again enjoy unchallenged pre-eminence. The wartime influx of American servicemen presaged familiarity with the Reader’s Digest, Time, Newsweek, and other products of a more streamlined school of journalism. As technology changed and costs grew, control of the media would pass into fewer hands. Something of the individualism of Perth journalism in the 1920s and the 1930s would be lost; a combination of provincial identity and awareness of overseas literary and cultural traditions. These newspapers unquestionably had their limitations but at their best were motivated by a sense of awareness and responsibility towards their readers. Can as much be said for Perth’s press today?

NOTES
2. V. Courtney, op. cit., p. 241
3. P. Hasluck, op. cit., p. 241
4. Ibid p.243