

KEITH DUNSTAN – 1995

By Lawrence Money

When Keith Dunstan's father William Dunstan, the general manager of the Herald and Weekly Times, learnt that his son had applied to editor-in-chief Archer Thomas for a job as a journalist he was furious. He told his son: "I'll tell you what will happen to you -- you'll finish up as a sub-editor working late at night, bored out of your mind and on miserable wages."

That was in 1946 but as things turned out, sub-editing was one of the few facets of newspaper work that Keith Dunstan never had to tackle. Dunstan was a reporter, sports writer and foreign correspondent but it is his long and distinguished career as a humorous columnist and author, whimsically observing life around him, that has stamped his name on Melbourne.

He is Victoria's best-known and longest-serving newspaper columnist who at age 83 in 2008 -- 54 years after he penned his first column for the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* -- was still writing columns for Melbourne's *Herald-Sun*, filling in when the regular columnist was absent.

However that long-ago first foray into the columnist's craft was almost aborted. Dunstan, who had been sent to New York, then London by Sir Keith Murdoch as a correspondent for the HWT, received an offer in 1953 from the gung-ho editor of the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, Colin Bednall, to take over its daily column, Day By Day. "They had read my cricket reports," says Dunstan, "and thought anyone who could write about something as odd as that should be able to write a column."

Dunstan quit the HWT and sailed for Brisbane with wife Marie and two children but when they arrived after a five-week voyage, Dunstan learnt that Bednall had resigned. "I rang Ted Bray, the new editor-in-chief and asked if I still had a job. Bray told me: 'if you don't come, we'll sue you'."

Thus began Dunstan's marathon. He wrote Day By Day for four years then, partly to be closer to his mother after his father's death, Dunstan and clan moved to Melbourne and

he was hired by HWT editor-in-chief John Waters to take over the long-running daily column, *A Place In The Sun*, which had been in the *Sun News-Pictorial* since the first edition in September 1922.

“That kept me busy for the next 27 years,” says Dunstan who at his peak was writing a daily column Monday to Friday in *The Sun*, a Saturday feature in *The Sun*, a weekly column called Batman’s Melbourne in *The Bulletin* magazine and an un-bylined advertising column in *The Age*.

The Batman column, named after Melbourne co-founder John Batman, also was anonymous but eventually word got out. Frank Daly, the editor-in-chief, called him in and said accusingly: “You’re Batman!” Dunstan had to confess. These were the days when it was verboten to write for anyone outside your own stable but Dunstan explained that he had four children to put through school.

However if the HWT cared to raise his salary to compensate he would happily have Batman retire. The HWT, notoriously tight with wages, beckoned Batman to ride on.

Dunstan’s daily column, known in the craft as APITS or ‘Armpits’, became an institution in Melbourne and created a few other institutions along the way. One was the Anti-Football League – now run by one of his grandsons -- to combat the mania of the then VFL. Ironically his protest group, which has raised huge amounts of money for charity over the years, bore the acronym that eventually matched that of the national league, the AFL.

Dunstan’s endless search for ways of filling the space led him to participate in a wide variety of stunts. In 1964 Melbourne was paralysed by a transport strike and Dunstan decided to borrow a Malvern Star bicycle, ride to work and write about it. That was the start of a long love affair with two-wheelers and in 1974 he became founding president of the Bicycle Institute of Victoria. In 1983 Dunstan filled a column by playing a Hoover vacuum cleaner in a satiric orchestral performance at the Victorian College of the Arts (actor Fred Parslow played a floor polisher). They played the Grand Grand Festival Overture – aimed at mocking the pomposity of such compositions – and Dunstan reported later that his instrument had only three notes: “Low, medium and shaggy.” It was typical Dunstan – deft and wittily understated.

For all his accomplishments Keith Dunstan, OAM, remains an endearingly modest man who credits his wife Marie with much of his success. His 1990 autobiography, one of 25 books he has published, is entitled '*No Brains at All*', taken from a comment made about him by a despairing chemistry teacher at Geelong Grammar many years earlier. That teacher – and Dunstan's father – proved to be way off the mark.