

DAVID SYME (1827/1908)

‘Of all the noxious vermin that prey upon the political world, the trading politician is the vilest. We do not know where we could lay our hands on a member of Parliament who has more steadily and consistently devoted himself to the task of making a merchandise of himself and his high office than Mr Edward Langton’—an Age editorial of January 1877.

David Syme’s Age (the “Australian Thunderer”, historian Michael Cannon called it) pulled no punches. Naturally Langton sued but public subscription picked up the newspaper’s legal bill and electors ousted Langton at the next opportunity.

Today’s leader writers are mild-mannered Clark Kents by comparison. But Syme was definitely a Superman of the nineteenth century. His career shared some of the characteristics of that era: confidence, strong opinions, entrepreneurship, and tumultuous social and political change.

David Syme was 10 when Queen Victoria ascended the throne and outlived the monarch by seven years. He was recognised by his contemporaries as an embodiment of the Spirit of the Time.

He was also, as the Sydney Morning Herald observed, ‘a warm friend, a strenuous partisan, a fierce adversary’. As a writer and a maker of writers, the SMH said, ‘he aimed at compactness and a crystal clearness of expression, and his critical faculty was highly developed. No slovenly writer could exist on the “Age” in its day of might. Strong, terse, virile argument was the sole end of speech for Mr Syme and it was in virtue of that ideal he made so indelible an impression on Australian journalism.’

Yet David Syme did not start out to be a newspaperman or one of the most significant movers and shakers in the politics of the colony of Victoria.

He was born 185 years ago in North Berwick, Scotland, the youngest son of George and Jean Syme. His school teacher father died when David was a 17-year-old with a classical education but no training to fit him for a career. He toyed with the idea of missionary work and briefly studied theology and philosophy.

His first taste of journalism was as a proof reader for a Glasgow paper, but the lure of gold soon took him to California and then on to Victoria where for a few years he made a fair living as a miner and road contractor.

His brother Ebenezer joined him in the colony and it was he, not David, who began the Syme family connection with *The Age* newspaper. After a brief time contributing to *The Argus*, Ebenezer joined the experimental co-operative in 1854 that was *The Age* and the next year became its editor. He brought in brother David to provide the business leadership and they achieved joint ownership of *The Age* before Ebenezer died aged just 39.

While David's sons—Geoffrey, Herbert and Oswald— also put their stamp on the paper, it was David as sole proprietor who personified *The Age*.

For most Victorians, both in his time and beyond, David Syme WAS *The Age* - a king maker and the father of protection. For 48 years, David Syme's voice was heard on the great social and political issues of both Victoria and the emerging Commonwealth, where, for example, his ticket of 10 delegates were all chosen to represent Victorian interests at the 1897 Federal Convention.

Today we know of his journalism and his political clout, but little of his four books on political economics, the nature of representative government, his critique of Darwin's theory of evolution and a later investigation of the soul and social organisation. Some say he was Australia's first economist - and we don't think of him as the dedicated hands-on scientific farmer.

Nor do we remember him as a nineteenth century media mogul, yet his newspaper empire contained not just *The Age* but a number of successful periodicals such as the *Leader*, the *Illustrated Australian News*, the *Age Annual* and the practical publication, with the cumbersome masthead, the *Farmers' Journal and Gardeners' Chronicle*.

Like a good leader, he gathered around him a stable of talented, intelligent men to help him expand the empire: Alfred Deakin, Charles Pearson, James Harrison, Arthur Windsor, and many more.

He worked incredibly hard, and despite being seen as taciturn and fierce of expression, he commanded the loyalty of both editorial his staff and his production workers.

The media historian Elizabeth Morrison has forcefully argued that past concentration on Syme's political influence—and *The Age*—has obscured his achievements as a newspaperman whose business acumen was important in the formation and growth of the Australian daily press.

He was bold in business as well as forceful in words. When advertisers deserted him because they didn't like his editorial stance, he slashed the *Age's* cover price and doubled circulation. The advertisers came back. He used that tactic twice so that the sixpenny *Age* of the 1850s with its miserable circulation of a couple of thousand had, by the turn of the century, grown to a paper of power selling 100,000 copies at a penny a time.

He had marketing savvy, sure, but he also knew how to harness new technologies to build his business

Syme installed the first rotary press in Australia, which allowed mass production enabling the attractive cover price. He tried—unsuccessfully—to set up a cable news service when the overseas cable connection was made in 1872. He persevered--and finally launched his own service to compete with the Australian Press Association.

Although he was slower than some other dailies to install linotype machines, he treated the redundant compositors with a generosity rare for the time. He gave them bonuses or pensions, calculated on their age and length of service. That was three years before the colony introduced the old age pension.

It is strange that these real accomplishments are forgotten while his shaky claim to being THE father of protection has endured. He didn't let the facts stand in the way of his reputation.

He maintained that *The Age* was the only paper in Australia to support protection although James Harrison in *The Geelong Advertiser* had been urging protection before *The Age* was born.

Syme's role as a 'king-maker' puts undue emphasis on the political. In reality his *Age* addressed itself to the full range of issues facing the colony: education, irrigation, rural reform, the conditions of factory workers, commerce, exploration, sports and the arts.

Critics called David Syme a newspaper dictator. Certainly he was autocratic and disturbingly powerful. He was ruthless and opinionated, a stranger to the idea of balanced reporting. In that he was a product of his times.

But in his sophisticated understanding of how the newspaper business worked, in his commitment to social justice and equality, in his persistent pursuit of those in public office who sold their integrity to the highest bidder, we see someone else: a man who built a thriving business based on upholding the values of good and fearless journalism.

David Syme was responsible for developing *The Age* into one of the truly great international journals.

It is my fervent hope that it continues to exist as a newspaper for many years to come.

(Presented by Ranald Macdonald at Media Hall of Fame night – December 6, 2012)

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