

The Hazelbrook Herald

January 25, 1898

FROM THE EDITOR:

Our last day in print seems like an occasion for comment. For sixty-eight years this newspaper has resisted nostalgia like a farmer resists scarlet fever. But I cannot stand by and watch this town succumb to disaster, to allow the blue menace to invade the night sky without protest. There is something to be gained from our history.

Hazelbrook, despite our hope and its promise, has unfolded as a town rather than a city. The flourish of the seal above the courthouse and the austerity of our stone park benches divulge its civic ambition. In truth, we are a middling town, caught between small-town fraternity and city prominence. A place with picture theatres and hotels but where people have rural faculties—men who know the difference between six and seven inches of rain without measuring, who walk past houses and look at foundations instead of windows.

This is a unique place. The air here is blue. An oily vapour from the Eucalyptus trees causes a shimmering haze, a tinted ether that we breathe. When our beloved and much-maligned explorers came this way they simply called it the Blue Mountains and the name has stuck. Did we possess less irony then? How did we come to inhabit such a blessed place? Not through invention, but discovery. Did you know that the British first

set foot on this island-country three years before oxygen was discovered? After naming this unknown territory, invisible gases didn't stand a chance.

History is in a name. The colonials didn't waste nostalgia when naming the trees of this prison shore—bloodwoods, mulgas, iron barks, ghostgums—but it infected their names for the places they settled. Our towns, which cling to these hills like mollusks on bedrock and sandstone, have names like Springwood, Blackheath, Wentworth Falls. They evoke English brooks and streams, fields of briar, places that have been tended for a thousand years, where wildness is more a product of human oversight than nature's will. In reality these towns stand on aboriginal burial grounds, in sandstone gullies where native bones lay set. Still, I'm fond of the names. They make me think of our ancestors in those early days, when they tried to capture the light of English landscapes in their paintings while staring at the olive-drab of the bush. In the beginning they expected to be homesick; they named some things before they realized they weren't.

My grandfather, Lyman Mitchison, recently off the boat from London, started this newspaper in 1830. Imagine that time. If you read letters, diaries and newspapers of this region it's clear more than eucalypt vapour was in the air. People fell in love with this place—the cumulus clouds that hung in the valleys, the streets that ended abruptly above ochre gullies. Postmen delivered love letters containing pressed flowers and butterfly wings. Doctors treated euphoria with resolvent pills and arnica head-presses. Women collected rainwater, scented it with hibiscus, and washed each other's hair. Men gathered at the town hall—from the Chinese waiters to the Swiss doctor—and talked about the present, instead of the past. While everywhere else immigrants experienced a sense of

exile, loss, here they came to feel blessed. Men carried compasses in their pockets to get their bearings and it was these they pulled out more often than their pocket watches.

Once, I am told, Mother Nature gave us a European winter and the river froze. Men cut enormous slabs of ice from the centre and lugged them with horses to a communal icehouse—a hole in the earth with a roof. Here they packed them in straw and sawdust and in the noonday sun of summer they kept butter and wild strawberries cool. My own grandparents had a cave at the back of their house which served as a larder. I can see my grandmother, Lotus, extending the reach of that cave-pantry with a pickaxe. This was how we kept things cool.

The blue menace has changed everything. It began with Inez Plum and her invention. The hum and glow, the small glass jars, a filament. At night she sat on her verandah and read this very newspaper under that generated light. But soon people gathered in front of Inez's lighted stoop, their mouths agape. It spread like the plague. People bought her prototype. Shop owners devised lighted displays, Cloud Street erected a row of lamps. Inez worked night and day keeping up with demand, even discovered a way of heating and cooling water with a metallic coil. If you think the net result was brisk drinks and warm baths, you are mistaken. As a result of the street lamps, municipal taxes have increased. Because of the lighted store fronts operating costs went up in the shops, edging meat and apparel into an untenable price range. The pubs began to stay open later since window shoppers increased their thoroughfare. This led to more drunkenness and an increase in the rate of violence against personal property. The new radios have become the scourge of our town. Unrepentant families blare city news from their windows. Not so long ago we huddled around crystal radio sets, listening to short-

wave broadcasts of plays and sometimes, because of mixed signals, would hear a radio call from a distant ship. The outside world came to us almost by accident.

It is not my business to attack fellow citizens, but I wonder about Inez's intentions. We all know her family. She comes from a long line of sturdy widows—Myrtle, Iva, Veta—all of whom have resisted tradition. When these women married they inverted custom and kept their own names. It was *they* who took men. They married accountants, storeowners, law clerks; men who were stable and uncomplicated, but who possessed weak hearts, unstable livers, a proneness to exposure. These were men who would rise after dinner and wind the hands of the great clocks in their hallways before retiring to bed completely satisfied. The women in that family, even before their husbands conveniently dropped off one morning at breakfast, stayed up late, meddling in the affairs of men—grafting objects into invention. I was in school with Inez and I remember that she followed the history of this dark science with a kind of mania. She had memorized the milestones: the reaction of amber and magnets in 1600, Galvani's experiment in which he touched the leg of a dead frog with a metal knife and made it jump, Franklin's lightning storm, his iron spike and silken kite. She knew these facts like the names of kings or Prime Ministers, but I always suspected she was an anarchist. Eyes like black onyx, raven hair. Inez, what good can come of endless hours of light? Men without sleep are a dangerous notion.

But perhaps the most objectionable impact of her invention is its effect on our news. This newspaper has prided itself on shielding our community from the vulgarity of big city presses. We know they run graphic headlines, use words like 'murder' and 'rape' as if the public had no imagination. My grandfather, Lyman, founded this

newspaper like a novelist (a tendency I share; I no doubt will have more time for fiction after today). He wanted to watch his characters, document their lives, but leave room for the reader's imagination. This style has always suited our readership, until recently. Now that many of you receive long-distance radio broadcasts of the news thanks to Inez's transformer station and battery set, you have written to me questioning our journalistic style. It is true there have been occasional complaints after many of you returned from vacations to the city, cosmopolitan newspapers under your arms. But these were the exception. I need to clear our name, so allow me to tell you the genesis of our editorial style.

Here is Lyman the week before he started this newspaper. A starched collar and silk tie. Spectacles and a beard and those blue-black eyes that jump out at you even in a sepia-tone photograph fifty years old. He walks home from the make-shift town hall where he has met with a dozen men to discuss building a nature trail into the valley. He walks evenly, placing each foot squarely to the ground. This is important to him. Each night when he takes off his shoes and pads through the kitchen in stocking feet he holds his shoes up to the lantern. He is conscious of late that the leather heels of his boots have been wearing out at an angle. This is something he will remedy, he thinks. But for right now he is content. It is dusk and lanterns are coming on in the shanties and thatched houses. The air smells of gum-fires and people's supper. He is glad to be alive. But more than this, he is glad to be here. This is a period in his life where he will catch himself at odd moments—brushing his wife's hair with a bone-handled brush, teaching his boy to read—silently telling himself 'so this is happiness.'

Lotus has black tea waiting for him. The children, Sarah and Earl, are building a fire in the hearth. Lymen experiences swells of pride when he comes home, now that the house is finished. He finds himself looking up at the ceiling and admiring his own thatch work, patting a solid doorframe with a proprietary hand. He kisses Lotus on the cheek. Her hair is braided tight and this seems to pull her cheekbones taut. Her porcelain complexion has bloomed with freckles since their arrival. She is becoming *Australian*, Lymen thinks. He sits and watches the children arrange kindling in the hearth. Sarah is six and Earl is four. The girl is meticulous and elegant; Earl will have scabs on his knees his entire life. They come to his chair and greet him.

‘Papa, did you build the trail? Is it finished already?’ Sarah asks.

‘It’s just talk at the moment. The trail will take months, maybe even a year.’

‘How long is a year?’ Earl asks.

‘The distance between birthdays,’ Lymen says. They seem to accept this and go back to their fire. They are forbidden from lighting it, but they enjoy arranging the kindling. When they ask him, Lymen gets up and lights a twig from the stove and burns some butcher paper they have crumpled in the hearth. The arrangement of dried gum branches and bark catches alight. They eat their dinner in front of it. Even now the smell of wood smoke from a foreign species of tree surprises Lymen. How can a new smell evoke nostalgia? It’s the present he loves and the smell of Iron bark or Eucalyptus simply reminds him of this fact.

July 1, 1830

FIRE SPARKS NEW DEBATE

The recent fire on Gully Street in which Lotus and Sarah Mitcheson perished has enlivened a debate in the city council with regard to fire safety. Alderman Jones declared that ‘building materials like thatch are entirely inappropriate for this climate and we should be looking to corrugated metals for our roofs. The recent tragedy may have been lessened if the house in question was not constructed like a tinder box.’

A committee has formed comprised of Hazelbrook residents to discuss the plausibility of establishing a fire safety code.

Lotus and Sarah are survived by Lymen Mitcheson, editor of this newspaper, and son, Earl.

I think when he wrote this unpublished draft he still believed in an objective muse—it was like the Hippocratic oath for a doctor. But sooner or later the doctor also thinks ‘doctor heal thyself’ and the body is no longer a mere machine, it is *his* machine. Disease becomes personal. Grief does not need to be shared, it needs to be converted. Lymen made a choice that affected all of us.

The first edition was full of testimonials from bushwalkers and picnickers, cake recipes, amateur scientists who’d discovered new species of flower, civic affairs, luncheons with the mayor, horse races. There was no mention of the fire except by inference in an article on the wonders of metallic roofing. There were no obituaries and that tradition has remained. Lymen used to say ‘The dead are not listening anyway.’

Lymen and Earl led an incubated life. He home-schooled Earl and read Plato and Aristotle to him. But the boy grew up deficient in pragmatics: he couldn't count past ten, he didn't know how to hunt, he didn't know how to tell time until he was a teenager. He grew up in a new house with a corrugated metal roof. Earl was my father. He was loosed from his body after a hunting incident when I was still a boy, and it was Lymen who took me under his wing. He taught me how to walk square-footed, like a parade soldier. Not only do shoes last longer when you tread evenly, but you are less likely to trip. The pledge was never something he made me swear to, but it was beneath countless occasions. One evening as we returned from the newspaper where he'd hired me as a copy boy we came upon a dingo run over by a wagon. It lay in a ditch, its body broken and its head smashed by a wheel. Blood stained the earth beneath it. We stared at it for a moment before he said, 'Look at the way its teeth glimmer. It's like a pearl necklace.' Every event was given its best light. As I grew up in his house, he became increasingly devoted to local associations—the astronomy club, the bird watchers. He became the president of the nature trail society. He had by now trained his feet to hit the ground at right angles. And all the while he shielded us from harshness.

Hazelbrook Herald

August 3, 1831

MISHAP ON CHARLOTTE STREET

Late last night an argument and scuffle ensued outside the Lawson Hotel where various neighbours had gathered. Clayton Wesley died suddenly during the scuffle and his memorial service will be held on Wednesday at Picnic Point...

Since you want the hard-edged truth, since you no longer buy my newspaper because you find it naïve, I will use your vernacular: Clayton was brutally murdered. In fact, he was stabbed six times in the neck by his next-door-neighbour. Lymen knew this. But he also knew that postmen hauled locks of lovers' hair in their parcels. When cruelty and tragedy occurred it was an aberration. Was it important to know that a knife struck Clayton in the neck and how many times? If we do not pay homage to our shadows they will not control us. Is it so terrible to compete with a world governed by bold headlines? Is there a place for euphemism?

Here are some of the words we did not use: murder, kill, rape, stab, fight, suicide, homicide, strangle, mutilate, bludgeon, suffocate, asphyxiate, etcetera., etcetera. I give you these as examples of what you can look forward to when you are comfortably reading your city newspapers. A man falls from a third story window. An elderly lady gases herself in her kitchen. A baby is thrown from the side of a wagon. I gave you the soft-edged version of these events. Now you will read A MAN PLUMMETS TO HIS DEATH, SPINSTER GAS-SUICIDE, INFANT HURLED FROM SPEEDING WAGON. If we are guilty of arrogance in our choices then it is not due to denial but understatement. Since when has that been a crime?

Oh, there have been times we thought about revising the Policy. I've wanted to shout obscenities from the cliff tops after witnessing some of my neighbours' stupidity and cruelty, wanted to harangue and lambaste with fiery words. I've considered that there are not enough words in hell to describe the misery of our lives. On one occasion, I visited a sick relative at the local hospital and became convinced that we are a town of

malice. It was full of poisoned husbands, beaten wives, pregnant teenagers. Cancers of various organs. Lung disease. Broken limbs. Not just abuse and violence, but carelessness too. I wandered the wards. I recognized many faces—Tom Sullivan, in for gangrene, Megan Contrus with pneumonia. We exchanged pleasantries and I kept walking. Down to a sunlit room where a man sat reading a book. It was *Alice in Wonderland*, I remember. A grown man, I tell you. He announced his disease to me like it was an occupation: ‘Black lung.’ He had come from the mines in Lithgow. He sat slumped in a mustard brown dressing gown and smelled of hair tonic. I kept looking at him as he read. He didn’t seem to mind. I don’t know why I did this, perhaps too many years of trying to keep Lyman’s pledge, but I told him in no uncertain terms—without room for euphemism—that he was going to die. I don’t think he’d heard these words before. Not from doctors, not from his wife or children. He’d heard words like ‘grave illness’—the word grave should have been a tip off. And for a moment, as I said this, I considered that my family had been guilty of a crime for three generations. That just as we have not used graphic language, a man is not given the dignity of truth before his own death.

The man licked his lips with his dry, gray tongue and leaned back in his chair. His chest rose and fell rapidly; he must have had the heartbeat of a humming bird. Then he said, quite clearly, ‘I am a man who has trouble breathing.’ He closed his book and walked down the corridor. The dying, the stabbed, the murdered, the mutilated—they don’t want the stone-cold truth, they want to be bandaged in half-truths. It’s the living and the slower-dying who want to resurrect their fears of brutality, who want to know

how many times a man is stabbed in the head. We need something to keep us awake at night.

As I left the hospital I became aware that there were no flowers anywhere in the wards. Not in a single room. Bedside tables, nurses' stations—florally empty. I checked the town directory when I got home and discovered we do not have a single florist. Blacksmiths, haberdashers, undertakers, but no florists. We have become ashamed of trouble. Lyman and I are partly responsible for that. But the answer to our problems is not an invention which will replace all our local news with city hyperbole. We could have amended the Policy, expanded our vocabulary. Now it's too late. I can imagine a time when our houses will have a river of blue sparks in the walls, when meat will stay cold all year round, when we will know the news of distant nations within the same hour. I can also imagine a time when we slave and toil to pay for the blue menace, when our prisons are overcrowded as a result of late-night revelry, when we know the type of murder weapon in a distant detective case but not our neighbour's name.

Up until last week I was willing to fight it. I should tell you that I planned to speak to Inez directly, to speak my mind. After leasing the last of my office rooms to a solicitor—who no doubt will profit from our heightened criminality—I set off up Cloud Street, towards the Plum house. Outside it smelled of rain; it was going on nightfall. For some time now I have been avoiding the business district and as I passed through it I was taken aback by the roil and shock of it. Blue-lit window displays of hunting rifles and farm implements; a sulphurous glow in the butcher shop where joints of marbled lamb lay on trays; a wave of inebriate laughter from the pub's beer garden. People were lined up under the yellow of a street lamp waiting to buy battery packs for their radios. As I

passed by they fell silent. One man, his foot resting on a generator, was holding a copy of a city newspaper with a headline: Bush Woman Inventor on a Roll. I had to look away. I crossed the street and took the hill in measured steps. The Plum house—burnt brick, attic windows, a row house without neighbours—sat there gleaming in the twilight. I drew nearer. I should have been prepared for this sight. It was as if, somewhere in the heart of that house, Inez had ignited glass or crystal, sending radiance in all directions. I stood outside, trying to collect my thoughts, to gather together similar arguments that I have set down here. Music came from inside. A rhapsody of some kind. I doubted she could hear my knocking so I headed for the back of the house. A figure moved behind one of the shining windows and I looked inside. I was expecting the makeshift theatre of an inventor—imposing contraptions, clanking wheels, tools strewn about. Instead it was like a furniture showroom. Row upon row of generators, gaskets, filament bulbs, voltaic cells. This was not the electrification of a widow's house; she had turned the place into a factory. And there she stood, aglow, looking at her work with an expression like that of a vintner tasting his own wine. I watched her for some time, hoping the light would recede but also somehow mesmerized by it.

Finally, I turned and walked away, entering the cemetery where so many of our parents are buried. I stared at the grave markers. The Plum women had stone angels unfurling their wings, encircled cherubs with intertwined fingers, and engraved sentiments about the conquest of human will over matter. Myrtle Plum had an epithet that read 'Tomorrow Is Here Today.' I walked further and paid my respects—even though they weren't listening—at Earl, Lotus, Sarah and Lymen's headstones. Small slabs of cut sandstone. Lymen's plaque read 'Modesty. Vigilance.' Looking back on the

headstones I noticed that the cemetery was nearly divided in half. One side contained the ornate crypts, the elaborate headstones; the other contained the pauper-like graves. The division between the optimists and the euphemists had continued even in death. I confess it made me a little sad, seeing my family's little rectangles in the ground. But from the top of that hill, overlooking the town mired in the enormous sandstone gully, I felt a sadness that made my shins ache. I sat and watched our town. Gas and paraffin lamps, kerosene lanterns, these had shimmered and twinkled, had appeared like phosphorescent insects in the drench of darkness. Now the electric lights of Hazelbrook were constant, like hydrous stars frozen in mid-explosion. Or was it a thousand eyes staring back at me, unblinking and accusing? I don't know. But that was when I stopped trying and gave you back your night.

Formerly,

The Editor