CHAPTER FOUR – Newcastle

THE OFFICES OF the Newcastle Chronicle and Journal Ltd (NCJ) were unfit for human habitation in 1960. The crumbling Victorian building at the foot of Westgate Road with the ancient presses in the basement was in urgent need of refurbishment, if not outright demolition and replacement (the latter happened some years after I left). I started work there as a reporter for *The Journal*, Newcastle upon Tyne, at 3pm on Monday, September 5, 1960, the normal starting time. The decrepit newsroom had two newsdesks, one for the *Evening Chronicle,* the other for *The Journal,* but the three rows of tables between them for the reporters were shared on a "hot bed" basis: you bagged a chair on arrival at work as the Chronicle staff began to fade away and hoped that the stone-age typewriter at your place for the day actually worked. From three to about 4.30 pm the place was a thronged slum with reporters from both papers at work or chatting in an atmosphere of mild pandemonium.

A junior reporter's first task on arrival at work, unless "off the diary" on a specific assignment, was to rewrite selected stories from the evening paper as fillers for the morning title. Then the news editor would hand out new stories. On my very first day I was told to go to the scene of a nasty crash on the A1 trunk road south of Newcastle, near Durham City. A woman had been killed, and by the time I reached the spot in the editorial car, the fire brigade had cut her out of the wreck and she was lying on a stretcher under a blanket, about to be placed in the waiting ambulance. Somehow I assembled the available facts from the police and fire brigade and was conveyed back to the office. Even though there was a fatality involved, it was a

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routine story for a local paper, so it would rate a few paragraphs. Without training of any kind, I had acquired the necessary details, thanks to having read newspapers from childhood and therefore knowing what information was needed - except for one thing: the victim's first name. In mounting panic I spent the next couple of hours trying to find it, and only succeeded when one of the attending police returned to his station to sign off just as I phoned.

The other memory I have from a crowded first day was being recruited for the National Union of Journalists by a grizzled photographer called Ivor, who was the "father of the chapel" (office union branch). In those days the closed shop prevailed: in almost every editorial office up and down the land, you had to be a member of the NUJ in order to be allowed to work there. But your union membership card, in those times a black booklet with a hard cover, proved you were a bona fide journalist to anyone in authority or indeed members of the public. I really felt I had "arrived" as a reporter when I received mine after six months' probation. About a year later I was elected convenor of *The Journal* sub-chapel, which was subordinate to the NCJ chapel.

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One advantage of my workplace was the stinginess of the management. We were underpaid and understaffed, so within weeks anyone with any gumption got a chance to learn many aspects of the trade. Within months I had done my first book review, written leaders, edited a weekly page for young people, tried my hand at features, even whole series, and briefly edited the diary column. I was also allowed to write the occasional feature on foreign affairs: I soon developed my only coherent and

sustained ambition - to be a foreign correspondent, perhaps even for *The Times*. Like father... All this was in addition to the normal reporting tasks of covering crimes, crashes, fires, court cases and inquests, garden shows and stock prices, school prize days, weddings, funerals and church services, local government news and elections, strikes and company reports - I even wrote a fashion piece about the Duchess of Northumberland's hat. All this and the prevailing parsimony made NCJ one of the very best journalistic training grounds in the country.

And I loved it, hard news in particular because it got you out of the office in those pre-internet days and on the road. One or two of my fellow graduate trainees aimed at producing as many features as possible, so they could show off their writing skills under a byline - generally a good career move. Straight news reports did not carry a byline unless they were large or special in some way. I doubt whether I was ever quite as keen on work again, which is saying a lot. In addition to the normal working shift from 3pm to 11pm, I quite often spent mornings working on stories on my own account, especially when it came to digging up background on crimes and trials.

Once every few weeks a general reporter had to do the late shift, from 7.30pm to 3.30am. When everyone else had gone home around 11, the newsroom was empty most of the time and you could sit in state on the newsdesk minding the phone and reading other newspapers. One of the duties was to "do the calls" every couple of hours, whereby a company phone operator would call in rotation the main hospitals, police, fire and ambulance stations to enable the reporter to ask if anything was afoot. Taking these calls in one of the stifling phone kiosks in the office left you

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gasping for air and with a sore ear from the receiver. The emergency services were remarkably tolerant of this perpetual nuisance and often proved ready to indulge in a friendly chat. Some grunted "nothing doing" and hung up.

One memory of the late shift that stands out was a call I took at about 2 a.m. one night. A plummy, posh voice said that he was calling from number ten Downing Street. I immediately assumed it was a hoax, someone in a "drink taken" condition, but the voice was so insistent that I felt obliged to take him seriously. He said that the Prime Minister wanted to speak to the Editor. As usual Dobson was still in his office, so I diffidently told him Number Ten seemed to be on the line and he phlegmatically took the call. As he drove me home later, Dobson told me the call had been genuine. The paper had published a leader that night criticising the Tory government of Harold Macmillan, who had apparently read it when the first edition arrived in London. Macmillan had apparently been worried by the fact that *The Journal,* normally slavishly loyal to the Tories, had turned critical. Obviously, the PM was as much of an insomniac as my editor, who failed to tell me what Macmillan had said...

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On the other side of the open-plan, first-floor office the sub-editors ("subs") processed the copy filed earlier. They sat round a table that was a random-looking collection of mismatched small tables congealed into one uneven surface. So rickety was this arrangement that on one night a sub glued a slip of paper carrying a headline to a table-leg he pulled out from underneath and solemnly sent it upstairs to the composing room via a messenger for setting. His dramatic effort to highlight the

dreadful office furniture was a mite diluted by the fact that the removal of the leg completely failed to destabilise the layout…

On a shelf behind the newsdesk was an FM wireless on which it was possible in those technologically primitive times to listen in to the police radio, which was illegal but a handy source of late news. On at least one occasion a colleague picked up messages about a serious crash in the centre of the city - and arrived at the scene with the first police car. He had some explaining to do… In the end they accepted that he had happened to be passing on his way home. Fortunately he was not asked where he lived, which was in a different direction.

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I joined on a salary of not £10 per week but £500 per year, or £9 12s 4d a week. Elderly people reflecting on the historically declining value of the pound is a common and tedious cliche, but even so such sums seem completely unreal today. I actually had to pay income tax and other deductions from this wage, paid net in cash with a payslip in a little brown envelope on Friday afternoon. From what was left I paid £2 per week in rent for a bedsitter, fed myself, bought the odd round of drinks during our nightly break starting about 10pm - and even ran a savings account, something I adhered to as long as I worked and beyond - a habit of thrift picked up from my mother (I even left university with £25 in savings). Before my six months' probation was quite finished however, my pay was raised to £12 10s per week (£650 p.a.) or £2 above the union weekly minimum - an increase of over 25 per cent. In April 1961 I signed a two-year contract which paid £875 in the first year and £950 in the second.

The Journal then had a daily circulation of about 125,000 (barely 50,000 in 2012), which made it the best-selling regional morning paper in England and Wales (the Scottish quasi-national press was a field apart). It comfortably outsold even such distinguished titles as the *Yorkshire Post*. The companion *Evening Chronicle* sold twice as many per day, and NCJ made maximum use of its plant by publishing the *Sunday Sun,* one of only three regional Sunday papers in England (and the reason why the national *Sun*'s latter-day Sunday edition is called the *Sun on Sunday* rather than the simpler *Sunday Sun*). For many cash-strapped journalists on the other two papers, the Sunday paper offered the chance of an occasional Saturday shift that paid significantly more pro rata.

NCJ was part of Thomson Newspapers Ltd, which owned about 20 regional papers based from Aberdeen (the *Press and Journal*) to Cardiff (the *Western Mail*) and was one of the largest press empires in Britain. Other major centres included Edinburgh and Sheffield. It was owned by Roy Thomson, a Canadian businessman with thick spectacles who started in the retail trade and was snobbishly dismissed (and grossly underestimated) as a "myopic Canadian grocer". He came to Britain in the late 1950s and bought the creaking Kemsley newspaper chain whose showpiece was *The Sunday Times*. After only a decade he made a successful bid for *The Times,* then the daily with the highest prestige - and the largest deficit - in Britain, owned by Lord Astor of Hever. The Thomson regionals had their head office in the *Sunday Times* building at 200 Gray's Inn Road, London, where such services as foreign news and national political and other news were centrally supplied. Denis Hamilton, editor of *The Sunday Times*, was also the editorial director of the provincial group, and before I went to Newcastle, I had an interview with his deputy, a Scot called Fraser, and was

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introduced to Hamilton when he passed through the office: he was apparently impressed with the fact that I looked the great man in the eye (which I admit I did consciously, against my shy inclinations). But then Hamilton, later knighted, was a former lieutenant-colonel who won the DSO in the last phase of the Second World War in Germany. Although he had trained as a journalist before the war on the *Evening Gazette* in Middlesbrough, he subsequently appeared as the very model of a former battalion commander, complete with impeccable moustache, as he turned *The Sunday Times* into the market leader even before the brilliant Harold Evans became editor in 1967. Fraser took an avuncular interest in my progress and invited me to call in whenever I was in London.

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The press was already in inexorable decline, though not yet in overall sales, when I started in 1960, even before television took hold and long before the digital news revolution. The liberal *News Chronicle* had died in 1959, a serious loss, when it was taken over (more accurately killed) by Lord Rothermere's conservative *Daily Mail,* whose subsequent gain in circulation proved short-lived. Former Kemsley titles such as the *Daily* and *Sunday Graphic* and the gloriously anachronistic Sunday *Empire News* went to the wall in this period, as did Rothermere's *Sunday Dispatch*. Papers as diverse as the Sunday *Reynold's News* and the *Daily Sketch* struggled on but were clearly doomed. Against the trend were the *Sunday Telegraph,* and later the *Mail on Sunday,* which managed to establish themselves firmly. The *Manchester Guardian,* long since enjoying national status, dropped its geographical prefix and shifted its headquarters to London, using the *Sunday Times* presses. Nearly all large provincial cities had, like Newcastle, a single morning and one evening newspaper (Manchester had two, London three, now both down to one apiece: in the late Victorian era, as

the Sherlock Holmes stories remind us, there were at least ten evenings in the capital). In several centres between the wars rival newspaper groups had fought a circulation battle to the death (NCJ won in Newcastle before the war, *The Journal* swallowing up the *North News*).

The old, now defunct, print unions such as the National Graphical Association (NGA) and the National Society of Operative Printers and Assistants (NATSOPA) were slowly but surely strangling the goose that laid the golden eggs for their members, whose power to stop production in an instant was used more and more frequently to raise wages beyond the level of all other industries, particularly in Fleet Street. As I recall, in Newcastle the journalists got on pretty well with the printers, with whom we shared the services of our execrable canteen. There was plenty of good-natured banter over the ham, egg and chips. This did not happen when I worked in Manchester, still less in Fleet Street.

The editor of *The Journal* in my day was Eric Dobson, a gruff former tank officer who had won the MC in North Africa. He worked incredible hours: in the office well before lunchtime, he was commonly still there when the late-shift reporter went home at 3.30 a.m. His deputy was the portly, bald Dick Parrack, owner of a short fuse. He went on to an executive post with Rupert Murdoch's London operation, which published the *News of the World* (his first British acquisition) and later *The Sun*.

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So did Norman Batey, editor of the *Sunday Sun* in my time, another testimony to the quality of Newcastle journalism. He was a sadistic homosexual. Evidence? On one Saturday shift he called me over and pointed to two pictures on his desk, related to a story to run that night. He invited me to choose the one I thought better. I duly chose, whereupon he smiled triumphantly and said my choice showed how inexperienced I was - all this in front of several colleagues. I'm sure I blushed, but I was coming out of my shell by then, my confidence slowly developing, and I had the wit (if such it was) to say, since there was nothing to choose between the two pictures in quality, that I chose the one because I knew he would choose the other. I could see he was not pleased but he decided not to bawl me out for my impertinence. His usual attitude to young reporters was sneering scepticism. Part of my training in Newcastle was in banter, which sometimes contained a half-concealed edge. I learned to give as good as I got, even though this could be risky.

Editors were driven (or drove themselves) home at the end of their long day in a company car, usually a brown Hillman Minx, and both Dobson and Batey often gave the late reporter a lift home. On the one occasion Batey gave me a lift in a chauffeur-driven Minx and, seated next to me in the back, he put his hand on my knee and stroked my thigh. Sadistic? Probably. Homosexual? Clearly. Bullying abuse of power? Definitely. I managed to get out of the car with my virtue intact. He never gave me a lift again.

Parrack was also a bully. I was just getting into my stride as *de facto* crime reporter when a sensational murder trial came to an end and I was told to write a background

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feature on the case. I duly did so. Parrack said my piece was decidedly inferior to the one carried earlier in the day by the evening paper (true). Once again it was a putdown in front of colleagues, but I was able to say (also true) that I had not been given any time off the diary to research the background, unlike my much more experienced *Chronicle* colleague. By this time my confidence in my ability to function as a reporter was accumulating as a result of my keenness and hard work, some success and a bit of luck. At least I could now produce hard evidence that I was capable. Parrack harrumphed but made no further comment.

One aspect of journalism with which I was never comfortable was the ancient and not necessarily honourable pursuit of "doorstepping." The law allows you to call at someone's door if your purpose is legitimate, even if that involves passing across private property, such as the front garden. It also allows you to take photographs of anything on or from the Queen's highway. These freedoms are often strained to the limit when someone is involved in a newsworthy event and a mob of reporters and camera personnel gather at a private house, an office or somewhere else frequented by the person concerned. I recall being sent for the first time to the home of a murder victim in Gateshead with instructions to scrounge a photograph and seek a quote from the family. On such (fortunately rare) occasions I would inwardly pray that the door would be answered by a hulking father, uncle or brother who would tell me where to go in crystal-clear terms to forestall my intrusion into private grief, prohibited by the press code of conduct. At least in my early journalistic days the "victims" were genuinely in the news, whereas more recently the targets are often famous for being famous - celebrities beloved of paparazzi with no respect for privacy. But on this first occasion (and far from the last time) I was invited in, asked

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to sit down at the kitchen table, offered a cup of tea, presented with the family photo album and allowed to take my pick. On another occasion I called at the homes of coalminers killed in a pit accident, where the same thing happened. The "price" then was to be invited to view the deceased, lying in state on his bed with pennies on his eyelids awaiting the undertaker, which I could hardly refuse.

Curiously enough this kind of treatment turned out to be almost normal in such circumstances - at any rate in the sixties in the North East, where people were rather nicer to the media than at the other end of the country, London in particular. People seemed to know what the press needed and were willing to provide it, or perhaps realised that cooperation with the press meant publicity which might help the police to capture an offender. Fortunately most of my journalistic career involved covering such topics as apartheid, German domestic and foreign policy or east-west relations, and I was not called upon to "doorstep" naughty vicars or priapic celebrities.

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When I started on *The Journal* the news editor was an overweight, pasty-faced heavy smoker called Charles (Charlie) Close. He soon moved to the *Chronicle* newsdesk and was succeeded by John Brownlee, previously district reporter in Blyth, a small fishing harbour on the Northumberland coast north of Tyneside. He was a "natural" as a reporter and loved recounting tales of derring-do as a district man, covering tales of Russian trawlers coming into port, allowing their crews ashore for a drink or two and an indiscretion or three. Brownlee was what is sometimes known as a bullshitter, but we knew his boasting was not idle: his record was sound, he was convivial and a good man to work for, and he taught his keen young reporters a great

deal. Eventually he ran the centralised training school of the Thomson group, originally under Eric Dobson, then with Walter Greenwood, which started in the later 1960s and produced a long line of first-rate journalists. The best account of the "Brownlee academy" is in Andrew Marr's book, *My Trade*: he was one of the most distinguished alumni. Brownlee's deputy on the newsdesk was another seasoned former district man from the South Shields office, Jim Slater, previously the municipal correspondent covering Newcastle City Council - the very model of a traditional local newspaperman, who was approaching retirement. When he left I became Brownlee's deputy or stand-in for my last year on the paper and was news-editing when the Seaham lifeboat disaster happened in November 1962.

The newsroom was a mixture of long-serving regional journalists and young hopefuls like me who were not expected to stay long. In those days of the closed shop it was not normally possible to get a job in Fleet Street without two years or more in "the provinces" or on weekly papers in the London area. There were lifelong local journalists like Bernard Upton, a chain-smoking, coughing reporter who inter alia covered Newcastle university for a weekly column even though he had left school at 14. His shorthand was superb, even if one sometimes wondered if he understood a word of what he had so immaculately taken down. Another old curmudgeon was Jimmy Brunskill, whose shorthand was so proficient that he was sometimes seconded to write the official record at the local assizes. He once showed me his home-made symbol for a typical criminal-court question, "did you or did you not have intercourse with this woman?" It was a dot inside a circle... My "graduate training" consisted in the main of two very funny half-hour reminiscences from Brunskill. Having had a surfeit of courses and exams at university, I evaded

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shorthand classes, something I regretted hardly ever, even though I covered court cases, not only in Newcastle magistrates' court and assizes (later replaced by crown courts) but also eventually the Old Bailey and the South African and German criminal courts, not to mention debates, meetings and speeches of all kinds. There were times when I covered a trial alongside reporters who had impeccable shorthand; once or twice one of these mechanistic paragons with a notebook full of shorthand would ask me, "what's the story in this?" Having no shorthand (though I developed a method of compressed writing), I perforce listened intently and wrote down a key sentence, a soundbite or two, using indirect speech for the rest of the proceedings. This meant that I knew what the story was as I sat down to write it, knowledge I was able to trade for some extra verbatim quotations. The prospect of hanging must have concentrated my mind. In the main I learned the job by doing it. I did take the trouble to read a book, *Essential Law for Journalists,* still an invaluable guide, in idle moments at work and at home.

There were a few women in the office. The notably "posh" Rachel Monckton-How was the fashion editor and also wrote weekly columns on local high society and the countryside. She may well have been the fastest typist north of Watford, which could help to explain her phenomenal output. Anne Shelton-Agar was also from the county set, in Cumbria, where her parents owned an estate. She and I were once taken to a back alley in Newcastle and told to embrace for the benefit of a photographer, to illustrate someone else's feature about young people causing embarrassment in public places. It was anything but an unpleasant experience. I bashfully wrote the piece using for the first time my nom de plume of Frank Cooper, a rough translation of my surname preceded by the informal version of one of my given names. It helped

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the management to pretend it boasted a larger staff than was the case, and saved embarrassment when I had several real bylines elsewhere in the paper. Then there was the lively and amusing Jean Urwin, from Tynemouth, who was cut from a different cloth: she became a hard-boiled reporter on the *Sun*. She caused a minor sensation in 1960 by marching into the bar of a working men's club in Whitley Bay, Northumberland, on behalf of the *Chronicle* and demanding a drink, before applying for membership (which she got). These old male-membership fastnesses have mostly disappeared along with the heavy industries like coal, steel and shipbuilding which spawned them and shaped the vanished North-East of my early adult life.

The transient population of the newsroom included Michael Hamlyn, an Oxford graduate who arrived a year before me, and eventually became the night or production editor of *The Times*. Lewis Chester, also an Oxonian, and Neil ffrench Blake started work exactly when I did. Lew, like Hamlyn, left *The Journal* within two years for the *Sunday Times* where he had a distinguished writing career before leaving at the time of the Murdoch takeover to write books, as I did.

When Hamlyn went south for his ST interview, he asked to borrow my one and only suit: he had the cheek to complain afterwards that it did not fit properly. Since he was over six feet tall and thin while I was four inches shorter and of medium build, this was hardly surprising.) I was Lew's best man when he married Judy; he returned the favour a year or so later. Neil, very much the old Etonian, with whom I briefly shared a flat, eventually bought an old Land Rover and left town, ending up for a while editing a paper in Papua-New Guinea. He forgot to pay the rent before

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leaving, but left behind a set of left-handed golf clubs which I sold for a net profit. He became an expert in equestrianism and wrote an "insider" book which caused a minor sensation in show jumping circles. Like every other OE I got to know, including Charles Douglas-Home, editor of *The Times,* he was decidedly odd. Anthea Hall, another Oxford graduate, joined at the same time and later became a feature writer on the *Sunday Telegraph*. Two young non-graduates of great promise were Roger McGlynn, a car-crazy young man who died in a terrible crash, and Alastair Smith, a very gifted Scottish reporter who died of stomach-cancer in his early 20s.

My first big feature, a whole page with pictures in October 1960, was about the mining village of Ushaw Moor, then the home of Ushaw College, a Roman Catholic seminary now closed but taken over physically by Durham University. It was the first of many such space-filling local features that bore my byline and covered schools, hospitals, churches and the like. I also managed to set up a side-line in features on foreign affairs which the ever-tolerant Dobson was happy to indulge, a volunteer being worth a thousand conscripts as one of my later editors was fond of saying. I wrote about such matters as the election of President John F. Kennedy, the Belgians in the Congo, the Indonesians in New Guinea, the Vatican Council, Commonwealth immigration and West Berlin governing mayor Willy Brandt's visit to Newcastle. I wrote the obituary of the Alien's Registration Certificate (see previous chapter) as a page lead. In the same edition, dated 18 November 1961, I had a whole page on a Newcastle grammar school and the main feature on the Young World page (which I was then editing) about the French in Africa. Such over-exposure was not uncommon for us keen neophytes willing to try our hand at anything. We did not

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feel it was slave labour; we knew it was good for our careers as well as the management's wage bill.

Among the many early news stories I wrote was a "vox-pop" piece on *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence, subject of a notorious obscenity trial in London, during which the prosecutor asked the immortal question whether one would allow one's servants to read it. When the prosecution was dismissed, the mildly pornographic book, not the greatest of novels, achieved briefly stratospheric sales as the public bought the paperback (price 3s 6d) to find out what the fuss was about. I hung about at one or two city bookshops and asked buyers for comments. I had been a professional journalist for all of eight weeks. I bought the book on expenses, which were invariably miserly. At this early time in my career I was also introduced to the "advertising feature" in which flattering copy was disguised as journalism in order to boost profits from associated advertising. We all hated doing them, even though (or possibly because) they carried bylines.

By May 1961 I was writing more and more crime and police stories, starting with the retirement of Newcastle City Police's senior female officer, Chief Inspector Jane Hudson, in April. In May I wrote a five-part series about violent crime as well as filing my first book review of Hugh Thomas's fascinating history of the Spanish Civil War. In June the big story was a bank robbery in which a young policeman was shot when the villains saw his cap outlined in the frosted glass of a door as he rashly tried to make out what was going on. He was not badly wounded and was the hero of the hour. I interviewed the new senior policewoman, Chief Inspector Olive McVeigh,

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who became a helpful contact. For some reason she was wont to confide in me when I called by her office, where she would pour me a glass of warm sherry: on one occasion she shed tears, though I cannot remember why - not the easiest social situation for a reserved young man of 21 faced with an emotionally upset middle-aged woman. When I did a feature on police pay featuring the monetary difficulties of an old-style constable called Gibson, I acquired several more useful police contacts who fed me a number of useful stories when they realised I had learned the most basic journalistic rule: never betray a source.

The occasional chance of writing features on foreign affairs persisted. The paper had just one leader writer, an elderly polymath (he wrote virtually all the leaders on all subjects) called William (Bill) Poulton. When he took a rare break, I was asked to replace him for a week. Among the topics I tackled was the mysterious death in an air crash in the Congo of Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations, in the first of an endless, still continuing, series of post-colonial wars in that vast African territory (on which I had already written a feature). I wrote two leaders about the West German elections. On the strength of this single week, I was able 20 years later to answer a truthful Yes when *The Guardian* asked me if I had ever written leaders - whereupon I was offered a job! I had been on the *Journal* staff for just one year.

Before the end of 1961 I wrote a two-part series on a mental hospital, the second bearing the clunking headline, "Way is open to healing of minds - 'Sinews of War' are the need today." This bore no relation to my copy and was the work of a features

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sub-editor called Harry Thompson, whom I thereupon described as "the man who put the P in Thomson Newspapers." My most embarrassing project on *The Journal* started shortly afterwards, over the turn of the year. Eric Dobson had decided to mount a safety campaign leading up to a "No Accident Day" on January 10, 1962. I wrote the introductory feature a month earlier. I then wrote spuriously learned pieces about the dangers of night driving, neglected electrical wiring, discarded cigarettes, open fires in the home and gas leaks. I did most of the work on a four-page pull-out (without a byline). On the day itself I wrote the splash - the front-page lead - on the campaign, again sans byline. That however was not the end of the story. I mildly endangered myself by stopping motorists who had shown courtesy or special safety awareness and presenting them with a ten-shilling note. I had pleaded with Dobson to make these awards up to a whole £1, but thrift prevailed. Parrack criticised me for making most of these awards to drivers who had stopped for safety or courtesy reasons, and I had to point out that it was the only time I could hope to catch them without risking my life.

In the midst of this anonymous *tour de farce* I managed to return from time to time to my main diet of crime and police stories, reporting the disappearance of an ears, nose and throat consultant surgeon from Durham. The next day he was found dead in his car at a spectacularly lonely spot on the Durham moors near the village of Edmundbyers. I pulled out all the "colour" stops for this report, describing in detail the bleakness of the area, the scenery, the weather, the atmosphere - and a sub-editor called Tony Duncan embellished the piece to such effect that I was ribbed about laying it on with a trowel. The "No-Accident Man" ordeal continued with stunts in Ashington, Gateshead, Sunderland, Wallsend and Carlisle, all the main centres of our

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circulation area, including of course Newcastle itself. I was set free only in the last days of January.

In March 1962 I wrote the splash on a Newcastle man's brutal murder of his wife, which led to a nationwide hunt. It became a running story until he was caught in May. In the middle of this I did my feature on Willy Brandt's visit to Newcastle - I had no idea this was a portent. Later in the year I wrote a large feature on Pope John XXII's Vatican Council. That was not a portent at all. Mine was a truly varied journalistic diet. I did an interview with the distinguished Geordie novelist Sid Chaplin, a truly delightful character who had a day job with the National Coal Board: he told me how he would go on a binge with friends in Moscow every year or two because that was the only way he could use up his considerable Soviet royalties, which could not be exported (his novels, such as *The Watcher and the Watched,* which I reviewed, had working-class settings and characters, which led the Soviets to put him in the same category as Dickens, exposing the social evils of British capitalism). In September 1962 I reported on the notorious Dr Beeching when he gave a press conference revealing the devastation he was about to deliver upon the North-East's rail network as part of his national British Rail decimation programme.

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My cultivation of Newcastle City Police really paid off at the end of the month. I was making my customary call one afternoon in September at the force's headquarters in Pilgrim Street and as usual put my head round the duty inspector's door. He told me that if he found me reading the report lying on his desk when he returned to his

office in ten minutes I'd be in trouble. So I read it, and got a wonderful mini-scoop which in a small way went round the world.

Some young men friends from the city had crossed the Tyne for a binge at a Gateshead pub. They walked, or quite possibly staggered, back towards the great Tyne Bridge, as famous as the much larger Sydney Harbour Bridge, which was modelled on it, on their way home. One of the bonny lads decided to cross by climbing one of the two arch-shaped box girders from which the bridge was suspended - from the inside. At the halfway point, where there was a gap for an expansion joint, he froze. He could not turn round, he could not go back nor could he go on. He shouted for help but nobody heard in the wind and the traffic. He dropped various bits of clothing to try to attract attention, and eventually someone looked up - to see the desperate youngster's face in the gap. The police were called and the fire brigade rescued him. I had this story entirely to myself, and it made the splash the next morning. The national papers, which had regional reporters based in Newcastle, were very jealous and berated the police for favouritism.

Two months later I got another exclusive, which I would have preferred to do without. An elderly retired man who lived alone in a council flat in Byker died alone - and was not found for four months. Nobody had missed him; eventually someone noticed a bad smell. Such sad cases are not unknown nowadays in our fragmented society, but it seemed unprecedented at the time and drew massive publicity.

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As part of the learning process, I also made mistakes, though I never cost any employer a penny in libel damages (I am sure I came close on several occasions). For example, covering a council election in Blaydon (scene of the eponymous races immortalised in the "Geordie anthem") I quoted one candidate, presumably of the right, calling his opponent a Communist. This was held to be libellous at the time and I was told off, even though it was an accurate quotation in an election context. I also briefly reported the death of a man, let us call him John Smith, in a fire at his house. I was given this information by the fire brigade when making my calls, and naturally I took it on trust. The next day there was a phone call to the office asking to speak to the reporter who had written the brief story (fortunately not bylined). When I owned up the phone was passed to me, and a man's voice said: "This is John Smith and I deny being dead." I apologised profusely. Fortunately he had a robust sense of humour. I should of course have checked with the police.

In December I covered the trial of a certain Colin William Spark. On the crime beat I had done several stories about alleged sightings of this man, who had gone missing from Gateshead in 1959 with his girlfriend and £26,000 (£780,000 in today's money) stolen in small instalments over several years from his employer, a parcel delivery service. His wife understandably divorced him *in absentia* in January 1961, another chapter in the small saga. He was found at Shoreham-by-Sea, Sussex, arrested and brought to Newcastle by train - where I was waiting with the photographer Arthur Steele (who later won fame on the *Daily Mirror*). Arthur got a picture of me alongside Spark as detectives led him away. To my eternal regret, I no longer have the print: I was wearing my reporter's raincoat and hat at the time, in romantic, would-be "ace reporter" mode! He was convicted in January 1962 and

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imprisoned for eight years, and I dusted off my long-prepared background piece at last.

There were three other memorable events in the early months of 1963, my last period on *The Journal*. I was told in January to gather local reactions to the sudden death of Hugh Gaitskell, leader of the opposition and national head of the Labour Party. This led me to knock on the door of the home of T. Dan Smith, leader since 1960 of Newcastle city council, who was also a national figure thanks to his grandiose redevelopment plans for the city, including massive slum clearance and high-rise blocks. He was genuinely devastated - Gaitskell after all was only 56 when he died.

Most reporters knew Smith, the most famous Novocastrian of his day. I did some features on the effects of slum clearance on the people concerned, who typically complained about losing the neighbourly communities in which they had lived, albeit often in squalor, while conceding the better environment to which they had been shifted. Efforts were made to allocate groups of flats to such street communities, but it was not the same, they said. And there were sneers about former slum-dwellers "keeping coal in the bath" in the expensive, high-quality blocks because they "knew no better." By the time Smith had finished with the centre of the city, through which he drove a motorway, it was almost unrecognisable when I returned in the late 1960s. Ten years later he was jailed for six years for corruption in connection with redevelopment contracts awarded to the architect John Poulson, whose alleged doings involving leading Conservative politicians became a national scandal. Smith

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pleaded guilty but never seemed to accept that he had done anything bad. He had overreached himself; but the consequences were by no means wholly negative.

Another event early in 1963 was a seal cull planned for the Farne Islands, a wild and beautiful nature reserve off the north Northumberland coast. It was an early taste of journalistic on-the-road camaraderie as reporters from the national and local press gathered at the Ship Inn at Seahouses. We were there to await the slaughter of the cuddly-looking seal pups that looked like golden Labradors with big round eyes but were best viewed from upwind. Winter storms saved them - it was much too rough for small boats to operate safely round the rocky islands and the short window of opportunity in the breeding season passed. Seals will reappear in this narrative more than once.

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I have to confess that I triggered a bus strike in Newcastle in this last phase. I was sent to cover a union meeting at which bus crews were protesting against split shifts - being made to work for two inconveniently separated portions of the day. A union official from head office in London had come up, obviously (to judge by his manipulative interventions) with orders to prevent a strike. When it came to voting time, he tried to fudge several motions and amendments into one "composite" motion. I had attended enough meetings to know the basic rules as laid down by Lord Citrine: you vote on amendments in reverse order one by one and only then on the substantive motion (as amended if applicable). I whispered this to my neighbour, a bus driver, who immediately stood up and loudly made a point of order. The chairman acted on it - and the strike was called. I modestly concealed my role...

But the most important event of those Newcastle days - and of my entire life - was my wedding. Chris had started work after Durham in the Manchester offices of the North-Western Gas Board. I managed to visit her there a couple of times from Newcastle, but when I told her what my new journalistic colleagues did with the handouts she was writing in the public relations department, she left, applying successfully for a job teaching classics at Newcastle Girls' Grammar School, a grant-aided establishment run by the Girls' Public Day School Trust. She found lodgings in Gosforth, a pleasant Newcastle suburb.

The path of true love, which it was, did not run smooth. We broke up for about a year: we were both working very hard to establish our respective careers. But we got together again, and when she told me she was pregnant we decided to marry as soon as we could. My father being a strict Catholic and her father being a Church of England vicar who wanted to marry us, we resolved to elope, and tied the knot at Newcastle Register Office on April 30, 1962, telling our respective parents after the event. Lew Chester was my best man, as I had been his in identical circumstances the previous year. We repaired to the bar of the Turk's Head hotel with several friends; our honeymoon was a weekend at a hotel in Edinburgh. Our first daughter Karen Nicole was born seven months and one week later, in one of the most savage winters of modern times.

We began our married life in a first-floor flat in Osborne Road, Jesmond, the smartest inner suburb of Newcastle, a sort of sub-Hampstead. I had been sharing

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this flat for nearly a year with two colleagues, one of whom had moved out not long before our wedding. Nurses working at the Royal Victoria Infirmary occupied the flats above and below, a happy circumstance, especially in the period of the break-up with Chris. One of my flatmates, Dave Ruddock (later managing editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and after that of *The Times)*, married one of these delightful neighbours and moved away, which handily made room for Chris. The furniture was decrepit and the heating consisted of a highly inefficient gas fire fed by a coin-in-the-slot meter that devoured shillings. In the enormous, high-ceilinged, frigid kitchen-diner was a large, copper-coloured hot-water tank and large windows that ran with condensation in cold weather, of which there was plenty. The inclination of the mattress on our ancient double bed to sag in the middle was countered by an improvised support made of slats from orange boxes. One early contretemps came when Chris made a special effort to cook an exotic dish of chicory wrapped in ham with mayonnaise. Unfortunately she was not to know that I had conceived a blind hatred for this vegetable in childhood and I simply could not eat it. I stormed out; Chris was deeply upset.

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Not long after the wedding, we had a brief moment of fame and (for me) a touch of the biter bit. The *Sunday Express*, which in those days pathologically hated the Church of England and week after week gave the right-hand centre-page lead to its doings, preferably misdeeds, almost every week, ran the immortal headline, *Vicar's daughter weds in office*. Apparently a parishioner who had it in for Chris's father, then Rector of Prescot near Liverpool, went to the lengths of persuading the paper to run this non-story. I was doorstepped by a reporter from Manchester and one or two of the other nationals' Newcastle reporters came round the next day (but published

nothing). I was embarrassed for Chris's father's sake but not our own. I told Dobson what was going on and he made a rare quip, to the effect that he was not in the habit of intruding on private grief. It was also a useful lesson for me in how ordinary people might react when suddenly involved in a purportedly newsworthy event.

There was a good pub a few hundred yards down the road favoured by us and many of my locally resident colleagues, especially on Sundays. In the other direction were a few shops, including a launderette, a butcher and a Jewish delicatessen that sold excellent bread. The office was a short trolley-bus ride away, walkable in nice weather, and Chris could also walk to work until forced to stop by her condition. Karen was born at the Princess Mary maternity hospital in Newcastle on December 6, 1962. I was not allowed to be there, as usual in those unliberated days, so I was at work when I received the call that Chris had given birth at about 7 pm.

I remember walking home on rare, balmy summer nights after the late shift without the need for an editorial lift, a pleasant route now bisected by a motorway. But in the bitter, snowy winter of 1962-3 poor little Karen was parked in her pram in the front garden buried under a mountain of blankets. Fortunately she lived to tell the tale.

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With Karen, 1963