

## REVIEWS

DR GAVIN ELLIS is a former New Zealand Herald editor-in-chief and a media consultant.

# Soul-searching and revealing memoir charts milestones

*Flair and Loathing on the Front Page*, by Jim Tucker. New Plymouth, NZ: Jim Tucker Media. 2022, 283 pages.

**N**AMES make news' is a mantra drummed into the head of every young reporter and heaven help those who can't identify a vital quote or face.

It is a lesson that veteran journalist and educator Jim Tucker never forgot.

The evidence of that lies in the pages of *Flair and Loathing on the Front Page*, the first part of his memoir spanning a career that began in Taranaki in 1965 and which has gone full circle. Tucker is a regular columnist on the *Taranaki Daily News* after serving as a metropolitan newspaper reporter and editor then becoming one of New Zealand's foremost journalism trainers.

His memoir is full of names, peppered like shot fired from close range.

This is not name-dropping in the traditional sense. There is no attempt to impress with tales of brief encounters with the rich and famous (although some surface from time to time). Rather, the author has used the pages to



chronicle the inhabitants of New Zealand newsrooms he encountered over the first 22 years of his career—reporters, photographers, subeditors, editors, contributors, librarians, secretaries, technicians and a few whose roles are difficult to describe.

There are literally hundreds of people named in the book, each emphasised by bold type at first mention. To complete the record, the memoir ends with lists of staff on various publications with which Tucker was associated or, as in my case, was in competition.

In so doing, he has provided what may well be a unique record of a slice of journalistic history in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Certainly many of those who were in the trade at that time will be gratified to find themselves finally acknowledged in print. It was an age when reporters and some photographers had bylines, if they were lucky, but no-one else in the news process was publicly recognised.

Tucker's book, however, is much more than a staff directory. He offers a personal perspective on newsroom

dynamics and, from his time with *New Zealand News* in Auckland, a revealing behind-the-scenes view of a publishing empire that went from the heights to oblivion.

He begins by establishing his (proud) provincial credentials, an all-too-brief encounter with Massey University and a move into journalism because (rather ironically for a man who would spend his second career there) it did not require a tertiary education.

His early mentors at the *Taranaki Herald* included Derryn Hinch who went on to blaze a fiery trail through Australian broadcasting, Richard Long who became editor of *The Dominion* then chief-of-staff for New Zealand National Party leaders Bill English and Don Brash and June Litman who was the paper's 'screaming skull' chief subeditor. He says Litman 'knew so much about the language she once sent off to *The Times* of London to claim the five quid they offered to anyone who could spot an error (they paid out)'.

This section of the memoir is full of tales about provincial reporting assignments, many with his photographer brother Rob who went on to establish his own national reputation as a press photographer and picture editor. Many of the tales are self-deprecating, a feature of the book which, in a number of cases, suggests Tucker is a little hard on himself.

He is justifiably proud, however, of his efforts to report environmental woes in Taranaki, including an 11-part investigation into water pollution in the region written while he was the *Taranaki Herald's* chief reporter.

However, it is in the second section of the memoir that he makes his most significant contribution to recording the history of the New Zealand newspaper industry.

In 1976, Tucker moved to Auckland and a reporting position on *The Auckland Star*. I had left the newspaper a few years before his move and we became professional rivals (but friends). The editorial executives on his arrival were the same ones I had left behind and his descriptions of *Star* editor-in-chief Geoffrey Upton, editor Ross Sayers and news editor then deputy editor Pat Booth ring true with me.

Booth was a driving reporting force, responsible for some of the stories that define not only *The Auckland Star*; but New Zealand journalism—the battle for justice on behalf of Arthur Allan Thomas and the Mr Asia drug trafficking investigation are the most famous, but there were others. Tucker describes him as 'the best editor the *Star* never had' and blames his failure to gain the editor's chair on a belief among the NZ News directors that his views were too left-wing.

I'm certain Tucker is right but the board misunderstood Booth. Much of his crusading journalism took place in the Muldoon era and what was seen as Left-leaning was, in fact, a fierce determination to hold power to account.

Tucker offers valuable insights into Booth's motivation, influence, and fallibilities. He recounts how a sense of fair play led Booth to 'spike' a list of supposed Communists that Prime Minister Rob Muldoon had

apparently sourced from the SIS in a move chillingly redolent of Senator Joe McCarthy.

He tells of Booth's dominance of editor Keith Aitken's news conferences and his misguided posting of a weekly staff bulletin that not only named the praiseworthy but criticised those whose work was below par. The bulletin created animosity in the newsroom, although Tucker says Booth was oblivious to it.

'Some felt overlooked and others thought undue recognition went to people who didn't deserve it. Some of those criticised became embittered.'

Tucker had his own differences with Booth—and other editorial executives—when he became picture editor and began advocating for better (that meant bigger) display of pictures than the *Star* allowed. His advocacy was not misplaced. He had a team including some of the best photographers in the country and newspapers elsewhere were responding to the inroads of television by bold display.

His battles led to real antipathy between himself and the paper's sub-editors and provide a useful example of the dynamics of a newsroom in which each department seeks to have its way.

In 1981, Tucker transferred to the *Star's* sister publication, the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly*, whose editor Jean Wishart had an expressed preference for male news editors. He describes the legendary Wishart as 'the best, shrewdest and most enlightened editor I ever worked for', in spite of her refusal to run a profile on Dr Ian Scott

who was the first openly gay candidate in a New Zealand election.

'Ah yes, Dr Scott,' she told Tucker. 'I won't be using that...I don't think New Zealand is quite ready.' Scott went on to lose the seat to National's Aussie Malcolm by a mere 117 votes.

During Tucker's time at the *Weekly* (which he describes with obvious professional admiration for the women who made up the bulk of the writing team) Brierley Investments Limited had acquired ownership of New Zealand News. Much of the remainder of the memoir is devoted to his time back at *The Auckland Star* which had the corporate raider's sword of Damocles hanging over it.

Tucker never met BIL's chairman Ron Brierley or even talked to him. He says that, to his knowledge, Brierley never attempted to interfere in editorial decisions. Years later, of course, the one-time glory boy of finance was jailed in Australia over possession of child abuse material. It also cost him his knighthood.

Tucker recounts, with feeling, the infamous 'Redundancy Day' when more than 80 people lost their jobs in a BIL-ordered cull. While those targeted for redundancy were meeting with their immediate bosses, the managing director addressed the remainder of the staff at an Auckland function centre. Midway through his speech, newly redundant printing staff burst in and the meeting descended into chaos.

*The Auckland Star* was facing the same fate that was befalling afternoon newspapers in many countries. It had

become a financial basketcase, although its death throes did not occur until after he left for a new career at what was then the Auckland Technical Institute. The memoir records the darker incidents of that time but is also full of anecdotes of the invariably lighter moments.


Tucker became deputy editor then editor of the *Star* and pursued some enlightened editorial policies. For example, he led the newspaper's support for the Homosexual Law Reform Bill after an approach by the official hairdresser to the Miss New Zealand Contest, Raymond Henderson. An astute and successful Auckland businessman, Henderson was present at the celebration of Tucker's investiture as an Officer of the Order of New Zealand in May 2022.

The Saturday late edition of the newspaper—the *8 O-Clock*—went and in its place was created the *Sunday Star*.

Tucker does not take all the credit for its creation. Indeed, he says 46 ideas incorporated in its final design came from almost that number of people. However, he sells himself short. Under his initial editorship (while also editing the daily paper) the *Sunday* newspaper became an immediate success and lives on as the *Sunday Star-Times*.

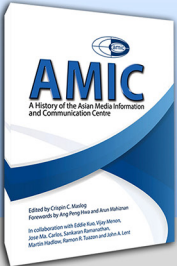
Jim Tucker's memoir charts his milestones, but it is also soul-searching and personally revealing. He dwells on his self-perceived short-comings, but readers should not make too much of them. Certainly, they do not detract from the significant role he has played in New Zealand journalism.

*An e-book version of Tucker's book is available by emailing him at jimtuckermedia@gmail.com. A print version that will include Part 2 is due out by year's end.*




Asian Media Information  
and Communication Centre

NEW and UPCOMING BOOK RELEASES



**AMIC: A History of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre**

Edited by  
Dr. Crispin C. Maslog



**Communication Theory: The Asian Perspective (2nd Edition)**

Edited by  
Dr. Wimal Dissanayake

Be an AMIC Member Now!

Visit [www.amic.asia](http://www.amic.asia) Email [info@amic.asia](mailto:info@amic.asia)