

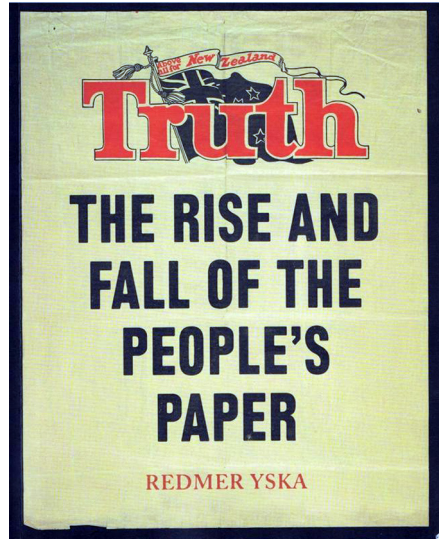
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Truth: An institution that refused to be institutionalised

Truth: The Rise and Fall of the People's Paper, by Redmer Yska. Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2010, 204 pp. ISBN 978-1-877517-30-3

IT MAY seem unusual to start a review of a book by first considering another publication. But it seems such a coincidence that while writing this review of Redmer Yska's book *Truth: The rise and fall of the people's paper*, the front pages of the last two *New Zealand Herald*s have carried lead stories that would not have gone amiss in that now defunct weekly. The screaming headlines, lurid and over-hyped personal details about scorned women and dastardly killers would have had former editors of *Truth* smiling in their graves at this turnabout.

Has Granny *Herald* taken up the mantle cast off by *Truth*? Leaving



that dire thought for another time, this space is devoted to Yska's book, partly motivated by the years he spent working as a journalist for *Truth*, but also by his desire to investigate the paper's role in shaping 20th century New Zealand society, press and popular culture and to ensure it receives its due within the pantheon of the country's press. For this research, Yska won a National Library Research Fellowship and he spent 2008 reading microfiches and mouldy old hard copies of the weekly in the basement of the library. He must have gnashed his teeth when a year later the library digitised early copies of the paper for PapersPast, that cornucopia of early New Zealand publications that now numbers 63 titles. Copies of *Truth*

from 7 July 1906 to 22 December 1930 are now available online (paperspast.natlib.govt.nz).

Yska's introduction to his work is a skilfully written and doughty defence of his old paper which acknowledges his personal interest in *Truth*, but convincingly encourages the reader to accept that the weekly deserves to be recognised for its impact on both journalism and New Zealand society as a whole.

I should confess my own biases, before I write anything further. My strong family background of Presbyterian elder parents, being raised on a Waitoa dairy farm and educated at private schools meant *Truth* passed me by in my youth. If it was mentioned at all, it would have been with disproving tut tuts and strictures not to read it. It was known as this racy, raunchy, 'rabid' paper that no nicely brought up young woman would ever dream of reading. Maybe I did at some stage, but I don't remember.

There was one positive '*Truth* effect' however. When I was a young reporter at the old Auckland Magistrates Court in the early 1970s, *Truth's* Bill Cullen was a wonderful mentor. He taught me everything I needed to know about how to be a good court reporter. He was highly regarded by the legal fraternity and on his death received a packed farewell in Court-

room No 1 from lawyers, judges and journalists. I now find the weekly a fascinating read, especially in my era of interest, late 19th and early 20th century New Zealand. *Truth* was a strident critic of Malcolm Ross, the World War I war correspondent who was the subject of my doctoral thesis. It harried and harassed him in its columns in prose and verse ('Our war correspondent. Malcolm Ross's ragged writing', 1915; 'Poor old Ross! The misfortunes of Malcolm', 1916).

Truth was established in June 1905 and its early development is the subject of Yska's first chapter 'Wowser wars'. The writer is splendidly evocative of those times and I particularly liked his description of *Truth* founder, Australian John Norton, as a 'combustible mix of tycoon, journalist, do-gooder and chronic, fall-down pisshead' (Yska, 2010, p. 15). It's clear that many across the Tasman were in two minds about Norton but seemed to forgive him his many sins. Cyril Pearl (1958) called Norton a 'flamboyant example of the larrikin demagogue' (p. 9) and Michael Cannon (1981) described him as a man completely at the mercy of his emotions with a lust for power, sexual conquest, political dominance and all fuelled by alcohol (p. 3).

He did not appear to practise his many dubious peccadilloes when in

New Zealand, but he did leave many a bludgeoned and bruised figure behind him in Australia, not the least a New Zealand journalist who dared take Norton on in court in 1897. William Kitchen sued Norton for libel ('Local and general', 1897) endured a long, drawn-out trial in Sydney. Although he won his case, his reputation was in tatters and he took his own life not long after ('Intercolonial', 1897). *Truth* in New Zealand also left behind a trail of battered figures, among them Bill Sutch and Marilyn Waring (pp. 161-175).

The first chapter shows a wealth of painstaking research which together with Yska's inimitable writing style makes for thoroughly interesting reading. This continues in further chapters as it traces the paper through the First World War, depression, Second World War and on to the 21st century, the latter very briefly. The weekly was a riotous mix of political and legal debacles, scurrilous and ground-breaking stories, good and bad journalism, strong investigative pieces and banal sex scandals, often based on salacious court reports of divorce cases. As Yska notes, in 1958 the press was stripped of its right to 'unfettered reporting' of divorce hearings—'a *Truth* mainstay since its founding in 1905' (p. 125). But while the reporting might have been slightly

less exuberant, divorce reporting remained popular until at least 1980 when no-fault divorces were finally permitted.

Yska has charted the hectic ride of the myriad editors that steered the good ship *Truth* through its history. Many of the journalists working in today's papers started work there, as the author has noted. One alumni of *Truth* is Edward Rooney, now at APN's *The Aucklander*, but a foot slogger for the weekly over a period of nine years. He has read the book and is pleased someone has written the paper's story. As he says, it's a thread of New Zealand history that has not been chronicled because of the 'disdain factor'. But he found it a 'harrowing' read. While many *Truth* stories were commendable and demonstrated the best qualities of good journalism, he says, much of it harmed a great many people, both those who were written about but also those who did the writing. Burnout among the journalists was common and many who left *Truth* had to go offshore if they wanted to remain in the profession.

Rooney started at the paper as a naive country boy of 19 but after a year was 'totally burnt out and freaked out'. He returned for further stints and faced many a dramatic moment, being sued, persecuted by

Robert Muldoon and being threatened with having his head blown off with a shotgun. He earned his odium or danger money—the 12.5 percent more money *Truth* journalists received over their mainstream colleagues. The stories told in the book by those who remembered working for *Truth*, Clive Lind, Rick Neville, for example, are of particular interest. There are few personal records extant of how it was to be a journalist in previous years. However, the author chose to end the tale in 1982 when the weekly shifted to Auckland with just a brief epilogue to cover the remaining years, so there is a further chapter to be added to the history at some point.

The author has been thorough in recording colourful and significant episodes in the weekly's life, from the Police Commissioner and the phone-tapping saga of 1953, the Holloway trial of 1959 to the Sutch File stories of the mid-1970s. It is a sweeping tale and has done what the author set out to do—delivered an 'accessible, popular work that captures the salty flavour of the paper itself' (p. 11). *Truth* was a paper that pulled few punches and it sent many a person reeling but for 100 years it shocked, titillated, informed, investigated, entertained and possibly educated the New Zealanders who chose to buy it. It was never bland. It was never middle-of-the-road. It

was an institution that refused to be institutionalised. It does deserve its place in New Zealand press history.

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