A hard-nosed, hard-case 'scoop king'

Warren Berryman, investigative journalist and publisher, 1939-2004

JON STEPHENSON
Former journalist on The Independent

THE DEATH of Warren Berryman, founder and managing editor of *The Independent Business Weekly*, marks the end of an era in New Zealand journalism. Renowned as a gutsy, no-nonsense journo and 'the consummate nosy bastard', he pioneered investigative reporting in this country and earned respect from friend and foe alike.

Born in the United States on 19 October 1939, Warren William Berryman wound up in 1970s New Zealand after a varied career that ranged from a spell in the US Navy civil engineer corps to gunrunning in the Middle East. In New Zealand, he added tunnel blasting, paua diving and teaching before deciding, aged 37, that he wanted to be a reporter.

He got his start at the *National Business Review,* quickly earning a reputation as a hard-nosed, hard-case 'scoop king'. A staunch advocate of business ethics and bureaucratic accountability, Berryman was both a scambuster and pricker of pretensions, not afraid to offend the powerful. He garnered a huge number of awards, and – after a stint at the *Auckland Star* – was appointed *NBR* editor in 1988 by publisher Barry Colman. Sacked when the paper was sold in 1990, Berryman was hired by Colman to edit a new publication, *The Examiner*.

When Colman reclaimed *NBR* the following year, the two papers merged. Berryman fell out with his boss and, with former *NBR* reporter Jenni McManus, founded his own Auckland-based paper – *The Independent* – in 1992. It wasn't until 2000 that I met him, though the *Indy* still held firmly to the principles he had espoused in their first editorial.

He had promised a newspaper that was part of the business community yet

JOHN McDERMOTT/*Metro*

McManus and Berryman : 'Scambuster and pricker of pretensions'.

fiercely independent: a paper that was serious yet entertaining, daring, provocative, avant garde, democracy's watchdog, a crusader and a critic. 'In short,' he wrote, 'we aim to keep the record straight and the market informed.'

Quoting William Fulbright, Berryman proclaimed:

> To criticise one's country is to do it a service and pay it a compliment. It is a service because it may spur the country to do better than it is doing; it is a compliment because it evidences a belief that the country can do better than it is doing...

Financially, it was often a struggle, yet *The Independent* consistently produced some of the finest business and investigative journalism around. After just three years it had won the prize for Best Weekly or Daily Newspaper at the 1995 Qantas Media Awards, judge Eric Beecher describing the paper as sitting at the epicentre of the New Zealand media scene, despite its small size, circulation and budget.

It was, he said, 'an inspiring demonstration of how ideas and creative intent are much more important than size or ownership when it comes to making a real impression at the serious end of journalism and publishing.' The paper was like a good dinner party: 'full of substance, but peppered with humour, a bit of gossip, fresh snippets of information, lots of personal opinions ... iconoclasm, questions, and a dose of cheekiness.'

As Beecher pointed out, what set *The Independent* apart from other papers was its personality – and much of that personality derived from Berryman. He spoke to readers in a direct, no-nonsense fashion, aiming, he said, 'to do our job without fear or favour'.

He loved nothing better than a good scoop, and his favourite targets included crooked lawyers, corporate con-men, judges, politicians, and the 'paid liars' of public relations. His name is inextricably linked with some the biggest stories of the day – among them so-called winebox affair, where he helped McManus break stories that won her Reporter of the Year for what was described as the best work on the tax avoidance debacle. It was work that also gave heart to Pacific Island journos, as independent Cook Islands reporter Jason Brown recalled on hearing of Berryman's death. He wrote in a message to McManus.

> Your newspaper's incessant fossicking about in winebox country

> affairs...gave us local hacks the courage to stick our heads up a bit more. *The Independent* had balls and, to mix a metaphor, it might be fair to say we picked them up and ran with them. Thank you for your early inspiration. It has had much more of an impact in our little corner of paradise than you or Warren might have known or realised.

Throughout his professional life, Berryman combined the best traditions of his native land with those his adopted home. His questioning attitude to authority and his love of freedom spoke of his American origins, while, in his lack of pretension, he was very much a New Zealander.

He was unashamedly pro-free market competition and – by extension – a believer in the free market place of ideas. In the spirit of Voltaire he would fill his comment pages with contributions from a range of ideologies, provided the writing was lucid, well argued and relevant. Thus it was that a left-of-centre thinker like Chris Trotter could become the paper's political commentator and a close friend to boot.

Indeed, Berryman had friends from all classes and walks of life, and a soft spot for the underdog being badly treated by bureaucratic or corporate muscle. This was why *The Independent* ran stories like those of a lone landbroker battling a recalcitrant Law Society over lawyers' monopoly on conveyancing, or an Iranian migrant family trying to get justice from Coca-Cola after a Coke bottle exploded in their faces.

With his no bullshit mentality, Berryman could be critical of mediocrity in rival publications – particularly those that pooh-poohed *The Independent's* stories, then picked them up and ran them as their own. Yet Berryman would readily set aside differences in the cause of press freedom. When the *New Zealand Herald* faced a gagging writ by defendants in a high-profile insider trading case, he happily submitted an affidavit in support of his competitor's right to publish the story. Editors at *Rural News* and *North & South* were among others who benefited from Berryman's support when they were faced with defamation suits he saw as affecting free speech.

On the issue of editorial independence, however, Berryman was inflexible. 'The only person who decides what goes in this paper is me!' he would thunder. Woe betide any advertiser or pr-flunky who challenged that notion.

Nor was he easily moved by threats of legal action. He knew more about media law than most lawyers, as many discovered to their cost. His staff could always count on his backing, confident that a solicitor's letter would not see

them hauled off a controversial story. The smarter politicians and bureaucrats knew better than to try intimidating Berryman, and those foolish enough to do so would regret it when their words were printed in the paper.

He expressed puzzlement that New Zealanders were among the world's best soldiers, yet could be curiously deferential to those in power. However, although not one to shrink from a fight, Berryman also had a sense of fairness and proportion. He told an over-zealous reporter: 'We gave this issue a good run last week, and can't beat up on someone two weeks in a row without good cause. We're a national paper, and have to use our power responsibly.' If one of his writers got a story wrong he would be furious, yet believed it only right to acknowledge the mistake and apologise to the offended party.

As an editor he was a real taskmaster. No believer in molly-coddling, Berryman set the bar high and demanded staff meet the standard. Journalists whose copy didn't make the grade were told in no uncertain terms of their deficiencies; those that did found themselves winning awards and being eagerly sought by wealthier publications.

He was sparing with his praise, but journos knew they were on the right track when he emerged from his office with a gleeful smile and growled: 'That's not a bad yarn you've got there.' His minimalist teaching style basically saw staff learning by osmosis, yet he would never refuse to give advice and would dispense names and numbers of contacts from a well-thumbed notebook that was a veritable *Who's Who* of New Zealand.

Exhorting his writers to lift their game, he would remind them they should be gunning for the front page. He would stroll into the Wednesday morning editorial conference and ask: 'So who's got a story that'll bring down the Government?' You won't find stories on the internet, Berryman would grumble, advising staff to get out of the office and build contacts by chatting to people in the pub. He told reporters not to be scared of conflict, and stuck a notice on his office window that pronounced: 'News is something someone, somewhere doesn't want published. Everything else is advertising and PR.'

A tireless worker, Berryman seemed to thrive under pressure. He was both witty and irreverent, and watching him devise headlines on deadline could be as entertaining as it was educational. He held strong views on many subjects and could be infuriatingly intransigent, but could be persuaded to change his mind – albeit grudgingly – by a sound argument.

He could also on occasion be moody or cantankerous, though it must be said that an editor's lot is not an easy one. Most of his flaws could be put down

to his constant quest for journalistic excellence, not personal ambition or animus. Certainly there was little that was mean-spirited about him. One obituary said he cut staff dead after they left – a claim that came as a surprise to those who had remained firm friends long after their departure from the paper. Three of them summed up his attitude to journalism with the words 'passion, balls and integrity' – qualities that earned him the respect and loyalty of his 'troops'and the absolute trust of his sources.

It could be said that Berryman was smarter than first impressions might suggest: his plain manner of speaking and gruff demeanour belied a tremendous intelligence – an in-depth knowledge of politics, economics and business, and an analytical mind to match. He was well-travelled, with a staggering array of passport stamps and experiences from many countries.

When the mood seized him, he could be a delightful raconteur. With a masters degree from the London School of Economics and a PhD from the School of Life, Berryman would talk about Malaysia's monetary policy one minute before describing the best lakes for fishing in Afghanistan the next. He could also be very funny; it didn't take much to get him reciting the sort of limericks seldom heard in polite company.

News of the death of this larger-than-life figure on 2 March 2004 left many stunned, and set off an avalanche of tributes. Even those of a different political persuasion like Prime Minister Helen Clark – whose government was frequently on the receiving end of Berryman's pen – could not avoid acknowledging the man and his contribution to journalism. From the legal and business worlds came words of heartfelt sorrow from those more accustomed to qualification and restraint. Of Berryman's achievements, a partner at a top law firm told a reporter: 'If you can achieve half of what he did before you cark it, your life won't have been in vain.'

His funeral – attended by media mates and power-brokers; politicians and businessmen of every hue – was a moving celebration of an eventful life. It was probably a while since he'd seen the inside of a church; yet the service's emphasis on ideals – not least in *Jerusalem's* words: 'I will not cease from mental fight/Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand' – was wonderfully apt for a fourth estate crusader.

Fellow journalists Gordon McLauchlan and Bob Edlin shed light on Berryman's professional exploits, while his quirky nature was traversed in tributes paid him by his children, Jake and Alice. From Jake came a reminder of Berryman's expertise with explosives – one Guy Fawkes' day he'd

constructed a pipe bomb and done his best to blow up the family fridge – and, from Alice, his inculcation of bawdy rhymes as well as the importance of education and travel. When Chris Trotter gave a haunting rendition of 'The Parting Glass,' there were seasoned reporters holding back tears.

Afterwards, as Berryman would have liked, his friends gathered for a drink in his honour at a nearby pub. As the afternoon drew to a close, they stood by the roadside and raised their glasses as his hearse drove off under Auckland's autumn sun. Who could deny New Zealand had lost one of its finest journalists and a staunch defender of the free press?

Berryman's passing is a double blow to McManus – his beloved partner in life and in work, whose affectionate eulogy was a study in dignity. Former *Indy* reporter Rob O'Neill neatly captured the closeness of their relationship; how, after the paper's Tuesday deadline and a drink or two at the local pub, 'Jenni and Warren would wander off to the ferry, arm-in-arm, as always'.

McManus now sits in the editor's chair, and has said that it's 'business as usual' at *The Independent* – as much as it can be without Berryman's guiding hand. There can be few that won't be wishing her well. Having the paper continue in its feisty and fearless tradition is what Berryman would have wanted, and there could be no finer tribute to his memory.

Jon Stephenson is a foreign correspondent for New Zealand Political Review*, and a former* Independent *staff writer.*
jonrstephenson@hotmail.com