



ONE MORE NAIL

Chapter Eleven **Journalism**

Before I went to bed on the night that I was not reappointed by John Gorton as a Minister, I wrote four Modest Member articles. As far as my writing was concerned I had about three years with my mind in fallow. There was plenty of P.R. work to do in both Works and Navy but there wasn't much room for ministerial writing. And though the panoplies of power were all very nice, and the help that I got from my staff could not be faulted, the plain fact remained that I had not been working half as hard as when I was a backbencher, slogging through Tariff Board reports on my own. I had plenty of pent up ideas waiting to be aired, so I proceeded to put them down on paper.

Writing newspaper articles was not strange to me. Away back in 1944 and 1945 I had been writing an article for one of the South Australian farming papers, the *Stock Journal*. It was called "Dave's Diary" and it recounted the sad experiences of a rather simple, well meaning farmer called Dave who had a plump and domineering wife called Mary, a banker who ruled Dave with a rod of iron, and a know-all neighbour called Clarkson who was always telling everyone how to farm and how to behave. At that time I was closely linked with the farming extension service and the departmental offices and I used to put in time working out what message we should try next to get into the farmers' understanding. I learnt then that the people you most want to contact are not the top 10% who will read the serious articles in the farming papers, but those that don't read solid articles. But these will read almost anything as long as it is personalised, if there are people in the articles who these readers can relate to, can visualize as people they know, or even sometimes as themselves. We used to have some very funny personal illustrations of this personal involvement when people used to ask Lorna, who was even less like Mary in Dave's Diary than she is like that awful Mavis in the Modest Member articles, all kinds of personal questions such as whether she was actually wearing to bed the red flannel nighty which had been described in Dave's Diary the previous week.

The second secret for winning the readership of people who won't read serious articles is not to attempt too much in one article. It is far better to take two bites at a cherry than to try to get too much in one. If would-be authors would stick to these two simple rules, they would find that people will read almost anything.

But I found that it was difficult to farm well and write well regularly, so I stopped writing Dave's Diary until I found myself a Member of Parliament. Then I discovered that I had a marvellous secretary who regarded typing as a natural way to behave. So I bought myself a dictaphone and I wrote Dave's Diary till I became Minister for the Navy. I even did it as Minister for Works because, well, dash it all, I had to do something to fill in the time. Dave and Clarkson used to be able to explain tariffs to my electors better in the *Stock Journal* than I could do from parliament. And if I wrote serious articles the people I wanted to reach wouldn't read them. And I must admit, with a small sense of shame, that I enjoyed writing them.

So on the afternoon I got kicked out of the Ministry and while the public service people were packing up the pictures and the spare blotting paper in the ministerial office, I was writing the first Modest Members on the kitchen table. Poor Lorna against found herself cast as a nasty

bitch of a woman, dedicated to pushing the Modest Member up the political ladder, when she had been for years trying to get me out of politics. Farmer Fred and economist Eccles seemed to come naturally on the scene and before we knew what was happening the whole cast was there, waiting to be used. There was some discussion about the title, and it was Lorna's idea to use the title "The Modest Member". The next day they were typed and sent to the *Financial Review* and this paper took them without argument and, after the first one, without alteration. They are now appearing in the *Financial Review*, *Adelaide Stock Journal*, the *Victorian Stock and Land*, *NSW Land* and the *Western Farmer*. The only states that hold the column at bay are Queensland and Tasmania where they seem to speak a different language from the rest of Australia. I have no doubt about the influence that the articles have had, and I hope their standard will not suffer now I am not in Parliament. There will now be no need for me to pussy-foot around as I sometimes had to because I didn't want to rock the Party political boat. But I must get the best of them together in a book one day. There are now well over 400 from which to choose, and though this may not sound as modest as I pretend to be, some of them are too good to be buried forever. In 1974 arrangement had almost been finalised with ANU Press and with Larry Pickering to do the cartoons. It is a pity this fell through because Larry could make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Towards the end of 1974 the New South Wales farming paper, the *NSW Country Life*, changed ownership and is now at least partly owned by the Fairfax interests who also own the *Financial Review*. So when the *NSW Country Life* asked me if they also could print the Modest Member articles I naturally said yes. But Max Walsh, the editor of the *Financial Review* said NO to that as he thought that the Modest Member was getting too widely spread. I protested but was smartly told that, if I wanted to write for the other paper, then I would have to write another article. When I told my secretary this and said it would be too hard to have to meet two deadlines a week as well as all the other parliamentary chores, she brushed my protests aside by saying "Of course we can do it". So I got out the old Dave's Diary file, dusted it off and refreshed my memory as to how Dave wrote. Then I wrote a weekly article called "Clarkson Says" with Clarkson again in Parliament, and again trying to tell Dave about tariffs and the superior qualities of Clarkson.

This column ran in the *NSW Country Life* until I left politics when I knew the tedium of meeting two deadlines without my secretary would be too much for me. Then Max Walsh, of the *Financial Review*, relented and now the *NSW The Land* takes the Modest Farmer column, but a week later.

In all the years I have been writing Dave's Diary, Modest Member, Modest Farmer and Clarkson Says, I have never been late with copy though sometimes we have had postal problems. And the discipline of having to clarify my thinking by doing the necessary research is of great benefit to a person as indolent as I am. And I have found too that having put a good deal of time on an article has frequently meant that I have had, at least, some facts and figures that might suddenly be needed in a debate in Parliament. I used to keep a fully indexed set of articles in my Canberra office as well as in Adelaide, and both lots have often been called on.

I have long since lost the feeling of panic that sometimes used to sweep over me, that I would not be able to think of something to say when I sat down to write next week's article. But I admit that leaving enough behind when I went overseas was sometimes a problem. When I went in September 1977 I left fourteen Modest Members behind.

The identity of the Modest Member was soon fairly common knowledge in Canberra and it wasn't long before McEwen gave me a push from behind by saying, in answer to a Question from one of his Country Party members, that he had read some of the Modest Member articles

and he couldn't help remarking that he could think of no one who had more to be modest about. And of course my appearance at Whitlam's press conference when trying to obtain information as a journalist which was not available to me as a member of Parliament blew my cover completely in Canberra and in other parts of Australia to a somewhat lesser extent.

But there [are] a great many people who did not know who wrote the articles and this led to some heart warming experiences. In 1975 Lorna and I went to New Zealand for a holiday. Don Chipp wrote to Sir Owen Woodhouse who was a member of the Appeal Court in New Zealand, asking him to look us up when we reached Wellington. Chipp had got to know Sir Owen when he was in Australia composing his monumental report on compensation for injury and sickness. Sir Owen rang us up one Sunday afternoon in Wellington to say that he had received Chipp's letter and he would shortly come to our motel. I thought I could detect in the tone of his voice that he was a little perplexed as to the reason for our meeting. When later he arrived at the motel, I noticed that he had a copy of the *Financial Review* in his car and when I remarked on this he admitted, in rather a shame-faced way, that he always read Friday's *Financial Review* because it contained a rather plebeian article written by a Modest Member which he presumed that probably I never read. When I admitted to being the author his face fairly lit up. "And soon we will be seeing Mavis, won't we?" he asked anxiously and when Lorna appeared we were taken back to his house, with him calling excitedly to his wife, "I've got Mavis here." We were treated with great kindness.

It was the kind of episode that made the writing of the column so rewarding. And when the letters came in after I had lost pre-selection for Wakefield, the common plea in most of them was "Please don't stop writing the column". I will gladly keep going so long as I can keep up the required quality.

One of the unintended side effects of writing the column was that Lorna came to hate being called Mavis. And I cannot say that I blame her either because Mavis really is a bitch of a woman. But of later years Lorna used to refuse to go to Canberra, saying that she was sick of everyone coming up to her to urge her "to get off his back" and so on. As she has been more interested in getting me out of Parliament than of pushing me up the ministerial ladder in the Mavis manner, I can understand her resentment.

But she is well able to look after herself in these matters. Last year she went to Brisbane to get on the grandmother nest there. She left here on a Wednesday, after I had gone to Canberra. I returned to Adelaide the next week-end, to an empty house. But when I went into the kitchen there was a little note saying "We are alone at last, your Mavis". Then by the TV set was another message "Come to bed, dear," so into the bedroom I went to find that Lorna had got the dressmaker dummy, complete with wig, arranged in the most alluring and provocative pose in our conjugal cot. It was so lifelike that I have to admit that I touched it furtively to make sure that it wasn't really alive. When I was younger I could have handled the situation but to a man of my advanced years it was a real shock.

One day, as I was typing away at this book Lorna came into the office and watched me balefully for a while. Then she said sourly "I suppose you will dedicate the wretched thing to that bitch Mavis." She really has had a lot to put up with.