

The Australian Media Hall of Fame: An Overview

By Michael Smith – Chair of the Advisory Panel

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ORIGINS

The Australian Media Hall of Fame began as a logical extension of the Melbourne Press Club's mission to celebrate excellence in journalism. The club has hosted the Graham Perkin Journalist of the Year Award for 40 years, the Victorian Quill awards have been going for more than 20 years and more recently the club introduced the Harry Gordon Australian Sports Journalist of the Year Award.

Within the Hall of Fame, for the first time the achievements of our best contemporary journalists can be measured in a historical context alongside the most important people of the past. The Walkleys only go back six of the 19 decades since the news business started in Australia. Many of the Australian media trailblazers are unknown to journalists, let alone the public.

Finally, the Hall of Fame project was generated when the public was being asked to pay for journalism in new ways when there were free alternatives available online. The Hall of Fame tries to demonstrate the achievements of great journalism and show why it is worth supporting and paying for.

CRITERIA

The Hall of Fame is not just about excellence, although it helps a lot. The key criteria is impact - people who have helped shape the history of their craft, their organisation, public debate, their city, State, nation or- in one or two cases - the world.

You don't have to be saintly to be in the Hall of Fame. There are a few ratbags, criminals, drunkards, a gun-toter and a couple of racists. But most are good men and women. If you have made a difference to the media or public debate in Australia, you are not disqualified by other aspects of your life.

There are regrettably few women in the Hall of Fame. Women did not get much of a look-in during the first 80 or so years of journalism in Australia. And although women journalists were the first women to get equal pay almost 100 years ago, it was several more decades before they received anything like equal opportunity. But things have changed and I have little doubt that future

inductions into the Hall of Fame will include many more women, perhaps even a majority.

THE PROCESS

We started with Victoria and spent about a year collecting material on hundreds of journalists. Then we assembled a selection that included the late Harry Gordon, historian-journalist Geoffrey Blainey and journalist and educator Sally White. We took advice from specialists in women's writers, colonial journalism and war reporting. At that stage, we were not sure whether the Hall of Fame would go national so Victoria claimed quite a few people who could just as easily been categorised as from NSW – people like Charles Moses, Jana Wendt, Jules Archibald, Rupert Murdoch and others. We finished up with 81 inductees.

As soon as it was announced, we came under a lot of pressure to go national. So we spent another year researching NSW people and assembled a Sydney judging panel including Mark Day from The Australian, journalism historian Bridget Griffin-Foley from Macquarie University and Mike Bowers, photographer from The Guardian. Earlier this year, we announced the historical NSW inductees, covering the first 100 years of journalism. Those NSW pioneers are listed in your program, along with the Victorian inductees.. Also in your program are pictures and citations of more recent NSW inductees who have passed on ...as well as two or three who could not make it here tonight. On stage tonight, we announce the more contemporary NSW inductees, the living legends.

NEXT

We have already begun the third stage of research on candidates from the other States and territories. Joining me on that judging panel will be Chris Mitchell to replace Mark Day. Bridget and Mike remain on the panel. We plan to announce those inductions at a dinner in Canberra towards the end of next year. We will also publish a book with profiles and citations on all the inductees.

If we have made errors, we hope they are errors of omission rather than commission. There are quite a lot of people on the steps of the Hall of Fame – some in this room - but were cases where we felt we needed a couple more years of perspective to make a proper judgment.

We welcome nominations, suggestions, bouquets and brickbats. Send them to the Melbourne Press Club web site. With your nominations, include justifications that address the criteria.

THANK YOUS

A few quick thanks you. Apart from the judges, there are a number of people who have worked tirelessly to make this happen. At the Press Club, President Michael Rowland, CEO Mark Baker and the Board have been unflinching in their support. David Fisher at the club helped with a mountain of research, Jenny Denton with the video production for tonight and the web site.... and Kate Handley has organised events surrounding the Hall of Fame. Dr Patricia Clarke of Canberra has been a huge help on women writers and newspaper historian Rod Kirkpatrick a fountain of knowledge on 19th century newspapers. Finally, thanks to all the journalists and historians who wrote profiles on the Hall of Famers – in some ways the list of authors is just as impressive as the list of inductees. They include Sir Harry Evans, Malcolm Turnbull, Paul Kelly, Derryn Hinch, Phillip Adams and Laurie Oakes.

Finally, what has become clear in this exercise is that there is no complete history of the news media in Australia. But through the stories of these extraordinary individuals, we get a pretty good fix on that history.

When Australia was first settled and when the first newspaper were published, the Press in Britain was exerting its Fourth Estate position to challenge the State, including controls and taxes on the newspapers. Few English papers challenged the State as vigorously as some of the early Sydney papers. Governor Darling blamed the Press for his recall to England. Darling had threatened to control the Press by introducing a tax on them. The papers fought off that threat by going behind his back to London. So for a period the Australian Press was actually freer than the English Press. Indeed, in colonial Australia the process of gaining a fair degree of Press freedom took only a few decades while elsewhere it had taken centuries

I hope tonight you enjoy hearing the kernels of many stories like that and then reading them on the Press Club web site and in the book to be published next year.