

A Century Of Words

It began, as a column called *Words* should, with Confucius and Analects 13: "If language is not correct, then what is said is not in accordance with the truth of things ..."

That first *Words* column was in January 1993 in *PESA News* Volume 2. I hadn't known about the first issue, but have missed only two deadlines in the 16 years since, and now find myself contemplating a 100th column.

I am writing in my Scarborough office, where so many columns were written and wondering, as one does at such moments, where the time went. I was 45 when I wrote that first column. Now I see myself unexpectedly in a mirror and greet my father.

Over those years I have filed copy from many cities, including London, Kuala Lumpur, Dallas, Calgary and especially Addis Ababa, my other home, but it is here at this desk with my books and photos around me that most of those columns were written, sometimes lightly, with my own laughter for applause; sometimes with sadness and great labour.

I have been reading through those past columns, thinking about this anniversary and the questions it prompts, not only those commonly asked of me, but a few asked now by myself.

Why did I do it? The aspiration began, as I said in *Words for Robert Bates*, (December 1995) in the early 1970s in Ponca City, Oklahoma, when reading Robert Bates' monthly 'Geological Column' on the back page of *Geotimes*. "Geoscientists keep finding ingenious ways to butcher the language", Bates wrote, 'and it's sort of fun to keep score'. I decided I'd like to help keep score one day, and the *Pesa News Words* column became the scorecard.

Where do the ideas come from? It varies. Sometimes it's easy. Something I read or hear just clicks. Two or three connected things come up, and you're away. Sometimes the idea is long-planned, sometimes not. Some come from colleagues: Alan Partridge's email about shibboleths and the Latrobe Unconformity, for instance, became *The Birth of Anacronym* in April 1999.

Sometimes it's hard: the deadline looms large and there is not an idea from here to the horizon. All you can do is flip through the 'Words Ideas' folder (where clippings and notes are stored) until desperation lights on an item or two; then you embark upon that most essential act of all writing: put arse on seat and

commence. Truth is, some of the best columns began that way.

How long does it take? Longer than I say it does! I've written a draft in three hours but not very often. The December 2001 column interviewing Greenpeace about whales in the Bass Strait was one of the fastest—and one of the most commonly remembered by readers, especially those involved with seismic acquisition. (The message remains current, and I re-ran an edited version this year.) I tend to rewrite as I go, and reconstruct as my idea changes, so six to eight hours is probably more the average for a final draft. Then Robyn edits it and we both review the proof.

Do I have a favourite? *Sex and young Arthur* (June 1993) comes close. It was fun to write and it was a point well made. The rhythm and wordplay is closer to my natural style than most columns. Some female *PESApersons* had taken our good editor to task for being sexist, as they saw it. My column was an Arthurian tale that honoured the female independence but allowed us awe at the elegance.

Most controversial column? *Crispen, not Crispian* (August 1998) criticising the disappointing quality of material submitted to WABS 2.

Others I liked? *The King of Spain has his name on the plain* (December 2003) about the pronunciation of Amadeus; *In praise of Anglo Saxon words* (April 1994); *Mabo Civilisation and Younging* (December 1994) was good on Mabo but spoilt by a too-clever aside on 'younging'. (Columnists are performers at heart and, like all performers, are sometimes want to show how clever they are!) I thought *Mud in the Dionysian Cornea* (April 1997) and several others on North West Shelf well names were entertaining. I liked the Christmas columns from 2002 and 2004.

I confess I found myself quite entertained, even amused, by some columns. I'd forgotten I'd written some of those things. (There must be a warning in that.) I even found columns (for example, on the misuse of the word 'capture') on ideas I thought of recently as ideas for possible future columns! That's definitely a warning that there's probably a younger wordsmith out there who'd like his chance to keep score, and whose younger memory will let him keep better score on himself!

Best feedback? A call in June 1997 to tell the whereabouts of my first great 'like'. Where are you now, Susan McRostie? I'd written in *Like, you know, like, and bras and stuff* in October 1995 about the magic of the word 'like'. I was in 5th grade at Mittagong Primary School in 1957;

she, in 4th. We were in the same classroom. Partners (by rigging the line-up) at dance practice. Then her family moved away. She'd married his brother, my caller said. It was nice to know.

Second best? A recent note from Neville Smith about the way poetry can inform and guide our lives.

Lessons? That most people enjoy good writing. That too few understand that writing well is hard work and unlikely to come without effort. Easy reading is damned hard writing, is the old saying. That KISS remains as good a rule as any—even if Hemingway now reads like a parody of himself: the clearer the thinking is, the simpler the prose can be.

That language will change, even as we speak it, and there is nought to be done about it. Well, not quite. As I wrote in that first column, words are like men's daughters, the Irish poet Samuel Madden said: always wanting to grow and go their own way. I still think it helps in the growing if someone pushes back.

That KISS is increasingly drowned in verbosity and jargon. One 'reviews procedural functionality' when all one really does is 'see if it works'. I don't know why this tide seems to be unstoppable. I do know we should resist.

That I can see in many columns how I felt at the time I was writing, and wonder how clear it was to others. Parents' deaths and children's accidents pay scant attention to editorial deadlines, and the columnist's need to be, if not funny, at least moderately amusing. I recall what a difficult time it was for us in 1998 when I wrote *Laze and Gem* about Alistair Morrison and the 'Strine' language, and how his closing years remind us that life has no predictability and much sadness but a wondrous potential for coincidence and magic.

Will I write another 100 columns? No.

When will I stop? Soon, I suspect. Changing batons is always risky. Timing is everything.

Why? It's not that I have begun to hear footsteps overtaking. Just that the gate by the grandstand has begun to loom as large in my sight as the grandstand itself, and seems to grow imperceptibly at each passing. And I keep thinking I hear Ulysses outside, calling for a crew, while the deep moans round with many voices. Or perhaps it's Robyn, a steadier sailor anyway, certainly than I, reminding me that there are other things to be done.

Peter Purcell