

OUR WOMAN IN SYDNEY



Nicola Walker, Australasian Editor, *Times Literary Supplement*
Courtesy of Nicola Walker

Nicola Walker discusses the *Times Literary Supplement's* past and its future at Murdoch's Fortress Wapping

In 1914, the future of the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) was in grave doubt as Lord Northcliffe, proprietor of Times Ltd, disliked its stalwart first editor, Bruce Richmond, and the kind of anti-populist reviews he favoured. On 11 February, Lord Northcliffe's manager, Reggie Nicholson, proposed that the TLS be 'submerged in the paper' and its editor dispatched. Then, four days later, he had a change of heart and advised making the TLS a separate supplement costing a penny, the same price as *The Times*. This 'mad scheme', for which Lord Northcliffe held Nicholson entirely responsible, paid off. In 2002, the TLS celebrated its centenary by throwing a lavish party for literary London, in which the poet Paul Muldoon took to the stage to recite a sestina in the paper's honour ('To the Threshing Floor' was published in the 18 January issue, alongside a brief history of the TLS by the editor, Ferdinand Mount).

Yet only three years later, rumours were rife among the TLS's staff that Murdoch was about to sell; and, indeed, it was finally announced in October 2005 that the *Times Educational Supplement* and the *Higher*

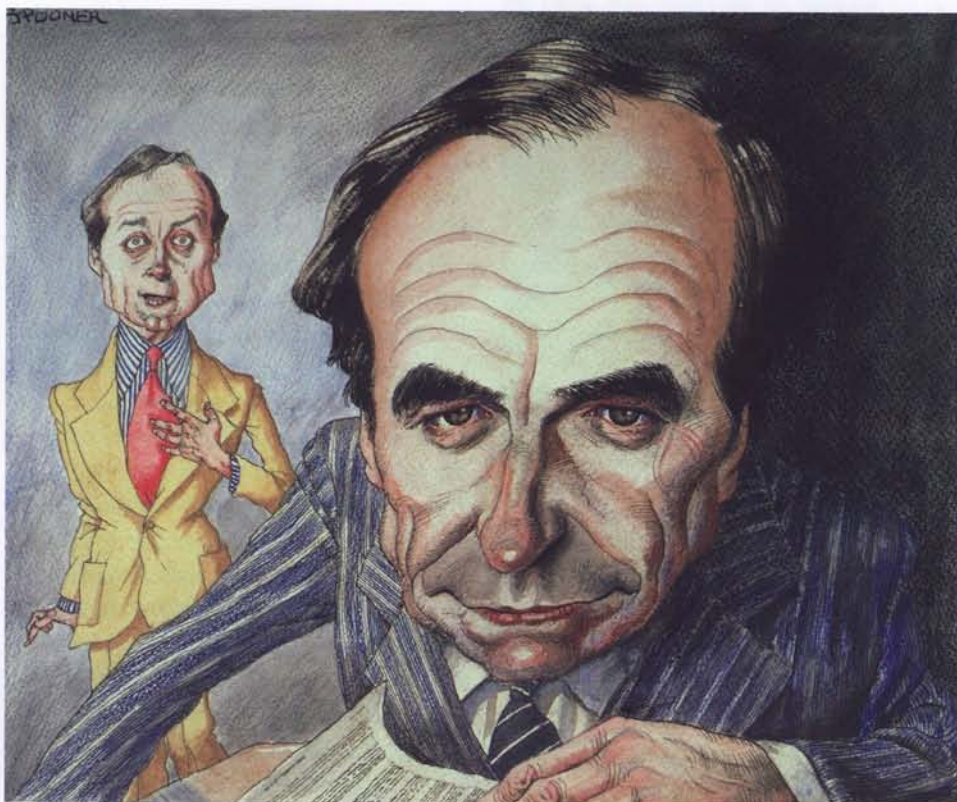
Educational Supplement were to be sold to a British equity company called Exponent for 235 million pounds. For the time being, however, the TLS is to remain in the fold, not least because Murdoch apparently signed an agreement precluding him from selling it when he bought *The Times* and its subsidiaries in 1981. So, 103 years after its first issue, the TLS has rejoined its former master and can no longer lean on the *Times Educational Supplement's* considerable advertising revenue to fill the coffers in times of need. What this will mean in the long run is anyone's guess.

As I write, my own future with the TLS is uncertain. It is possible that 'our woman in Sydney', or the Australasian editor, as I am officially described, will be quietly retired. This would end an association of 13 years and result in fewer books by Australian authors appearing in the TLS, particularly in the In Brief pages which soak up reviews at the rate of 10 to 12 a week. When I started at the TLS in 1992 and became the In Brief editor and general editorial dogsbody, the 'briefies' only took up one page. It seems incredible to me now that we were still being printed at the typesetters, and that I would have to draw squiggles on a galley to show the setters where the text should run. When the messenger (an elderly chap called Fred who gave the office a box of Rose's chocolates every Christmas) brought back the proofs, there were always lots of introduced errors; the pages would be read, corrected and returned and this process would go on at least three times, or however long it took to get it right before press day on Tuesday.

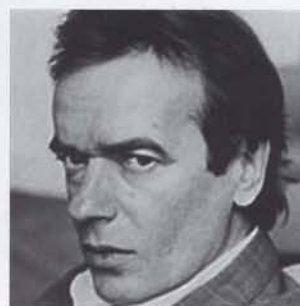
Nevertheless, there were sometimes shouts of horror when the paper arrived in the office on Wednesday and we eagerly opened it up to see how it had fared in the printing shop overnight. I lived in fear of being the perpetrator of some terrible gaffe, and was shamefaced about Randolph Stow appearing as Stowe. Indeed, the letter 'e' in names was my downfall as I also added it to Housman and Moorhouse, derelictions for which I was forgiven. The change to desktop publishing and Quark in 1993 was supposed to save such mistakes, as well as reams of

Unknown photographer
Lord Northcliffe
glass negative; 5.0 x 7.0 inch
George Grantham Bain
Collection
Library of Congress





left:
John Spooner (b.1946)
Portrait of Rupert Murdoch and
Harold Evans 1984
pen and ink and wash drawing;
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Pictures Collection
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above:
Martin Amis
Courtesy of Random House

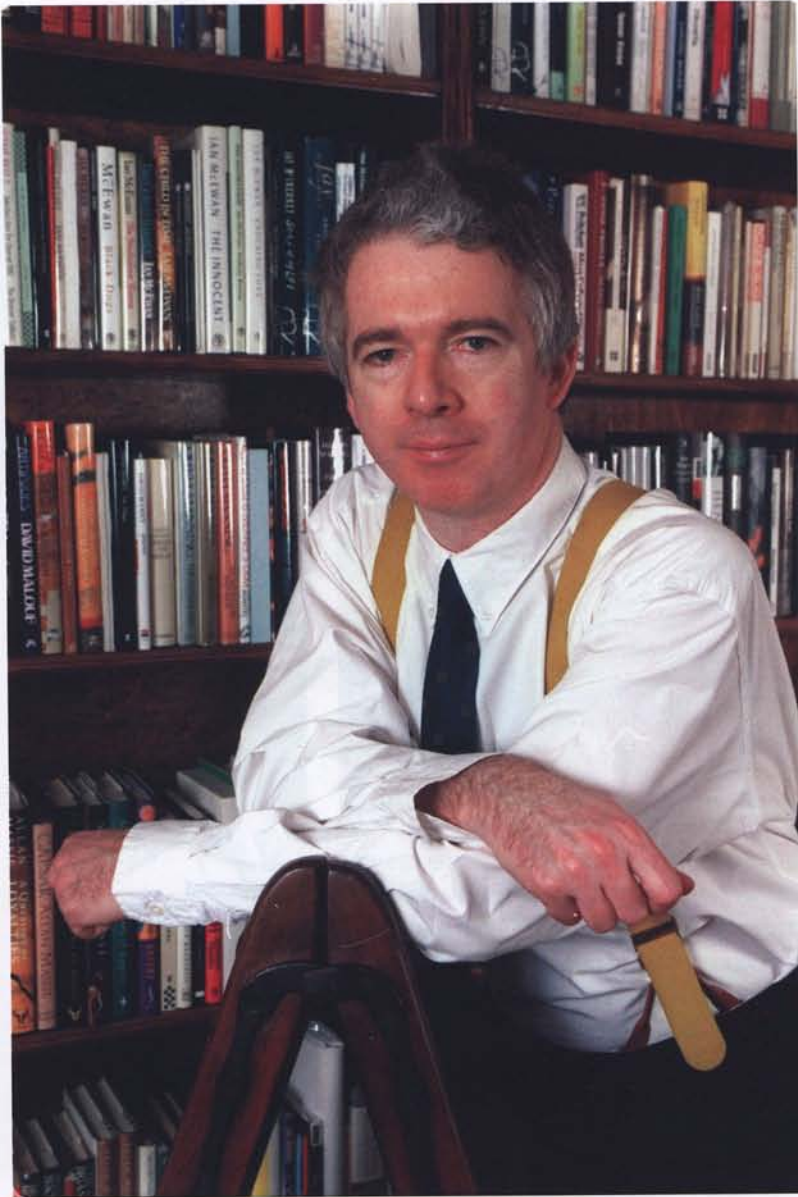
paper, but in reality nothing much changed. For all the advantages of on-screen editing, it remains easier to read the printed word, and it is the only option for our esteemed page-proof reader Richard Brain, who retired some years ago but still comes in one day a week to wield his ferocious red pen.

When I left the paper in 2002 to return home to Australia (after negotiating an agreement with the promotion's manager to be paid a small monthly stipend to 'raise the *TLS's* profile' in the Antipodes), we

were using a database to track reviews, and a system of storing them after they had been edited and returned to the writer for checking, that baffled successive IT assistants but seemed the essence of simplicity to the staff. Each week the editor selected the reviews to appear in the next issue; these were marked out in a small book called the 'Plan' which included space sold to advertisers. The adverts would often be moved, if a review came in late and was found to be twice as long to good purpose,



Neil Turner
Ferdinand Mount, editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, photographed at the *TLS* offices for a 'My Best Teacher' *TES* feature 2001
Courtesy of the *Times Literary Supplement*



Peter Nicholls
The Editor of *The Times*,
Peter Stothard, pictured at
home in his library
Courtesy of *The Times*
newspaper

or if a review came in and was no good at all. And so the Plan, in which all such changes were documented, was our bible and was forever going missing on an editor's desk and provoking a rumpus. It was often found lurking under some proof pages on a great wooden cabinet known as the Tin, which was the hub of the paper where people gathered to share a joke or discuss cricket scores, much to the chagrin of the deputy who fondly recalled an era when the talk was more edifying.

That era included the likes of Martin Amis, Victoria Glendinning, Blake Morrison and Peter Porter, who all did stints at the paper in their early careers; Alan Hollinghurst, who was the deputy for five years until 1990; and Redmond O'Hanlon and Galen Strawson who both put in more regular appearances than their present one day a month. The *TLS* has always been fortunate in its staff

and the present-day editors either tend to specialise in nations—the Letter's editor, for instance, who speaks French and Italian, also commissions reviews of books to do with those countries—or disciplines, so that Redsi O'Hanlon, who is potty about bats and insects, deals with natural history.

Peter Stothard became the editor of the *TLS* in 2002 and has written a great deal for the paper. He edited *The Times* for 10 years and is said to be close to Murdoch, which must help the paper's cause. He is also a passionate Classicist and any reader of the *TLS* will have noticed the gradual increase in these pages over the past two years, and a commensurate decline in those devoted to politics which was the special subject of the previous editor, Ferdinand Mount. This partiality, however, has never seriously affected the paper's *raison d'être*—which as Ferdy put it, is its 'comprehensive coverage, adventurousness [and] readiness to cover any book, no matter how obscure or difficult'—though the emphasis on literary theory during the 1980s saw the circulation fall to an all-time low of 26 414.

Ferdy, who was the editor during my time at the paper, and managed to increase the circulation by 9000 or so, embodied all the virtues of old-time English publishing, being astonishingly well-read and modestly self-assured. This spirit determines the tone of the paper's reviews as much as possible, and distinguishes it from smaller journals, both British and Australian, which at times allow contributors to air vendettas. The *TLS* may have given the Australian critic Peter Craven the chance to air his version of his abrupt departure from Black Inc. publishing in 2004, but this was as nothing to the vituperative attack on Craven printed in *Overland* in the summer issue of the same year. This piece stated: 'Craven's false critical coin has driven real criticism out of circulation, his only achievement as a critic having been to take up space that others might have filled productively.' It reeked of the 'tall poppy' syndrome that seems to have taken root in literary Australia where opportunities to be heard are so few and far between. For Craven, as a literary journalist who survives solely by his pen, is an anomaly in Australia, whereas in Britain the *TLS*, for one, relies on a large number of freelance writers as well as academics. It is one of the main differences between the two intellectual

cultures, and is not altogether to do with the lopsided population figures.

An article in the *Guardian* of last October (gloomily entitled 'Final Chapter for the *TLS*?') by the English academic John Sutherland described 'the level of discourse on literature' as being 'higher in literary London than anywhere else in the civilised world' and the literary pages of national newspapers and magazines as 'more lively and discriminating than anywhere else'. While it is possible to take umbrage with this, it is impossible to claim the same thing for Australia, in spite of the growing number of literary festivals and audiences here. I am inclined to assume the obvious; that Australia's weather, beach and bush invite not reading but vigorous outdoor pursuits. A motif in Peter Carey's affectionate account, *30 Days in Sydney*, was the residents' preoccupation with defeating the elements, particularly the ocean, and that could apply nationally. There are, of course, many more reasons, but it should also not be forgotten that we are such a young country in terms of European intellectual traditions which have had centuries to establish tenure.

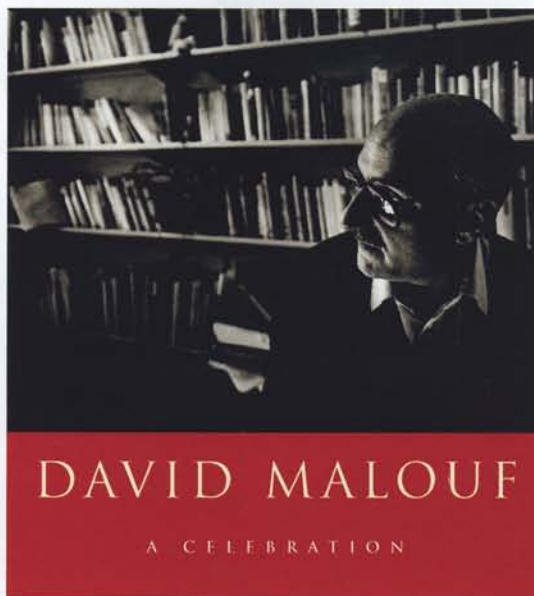
The big change since I started at the *TLS* has been the rise of the Internet and it is only because of it that I can be 'our woman in Sydney' at all. When I put together an

Australian issue of the *TLS* in 1994, it was a nightmare trying to get in touch with publishers and reviewers and involved much swearing over the fax machine. Now I can commission local writers, edit their reviews and send them on to the *TLS* at the press of a key. This kind of intra-cultural dialogue is important; it was terrific, for instance, in September 2005, to have David Malouf on Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington-Smith, and for those artists to be read about from Cambridge to Chicago. Even if it is an In Brief, it means a lot to authors to have just one international review.

I do not think it will be the final chapter for the *TLS* for quite some time, and reviews of books by Australians, albeit probably only those that make publication in the United States or United Kingdom, will continue to appear whether I am in post or not. Sydney-based readers of the *National Library of Australia News* will know if the Australasian editor has survived by checking the programme of the Sydney Writers' Festival in May. If so, there will be a *TLS* lecture, and I will be introducing it, as I have done for the past two years.

NICOLA WALKER is also a freelance reviewer and editor

The National Library holds every issue of the *Times* and the *Times Literary Supplement* since their inception, in 1788 and 1902 respectively. The *Times* has also been digitised and is now available through the Library's Newspaper/Microform Reading Room.



Cover of *David Malouf: A Celebration* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2003)

left:
Redmond O'Hanlon
Courtesy of Penguin Group
(Australia)

