

IS THAT YOU BWANA EDITOR?

Editing newspapers in Africa can be a humbling experience as evidenced by these reminiscences from **DONALD TRELFOED**, *editor of* *The Observer* *in London*

MY first editorship was of the *Nyasaland Times*, now the *Times of Malawi*, when I was 25. I spent a good deal of my time in the mid-sixties moving around this part of Africa in pursuit of stories on UDI in Rhodesia, the resulting civil war and sanctions-busting.

So it's 29 years since I first sat in an editor's electric chair — more than half my lifetime. I mention this, not because it entitles me to claim that I've learnt very much in that time about the Press or its proper role in the world. In fact, I realise now, looking back, that I learnt all I really needed to know in my first few days in the hot seat all those years ago.

I'd been sent out to Africa by Roy Thomson. I only met him once. He peered at me up close through his thick pebble glasses, shook me by the hand and said: "You make a dollar for me, boy, and I'll make a dollar for you!" My brief in Malawi was a simple one: to keep the paper alive, which meant making it acceptable to the country's leader, then and now a somewhat peppery individual called Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. I found all hell breaking loose, with the country engaged in a civil war — Banda versus a group of rebel ministers led by a man called Chipembere.

Journalistic integrity required that we should report the civil war fairly, but this wasn't easy since Banda had passed a law making it a criminal offence, punishable by five years in jail, for an editor to publish any story "likely to undermine public confidence in the government". So I made my first principled decision as an editor: I decided to back the side that was going to win! I gave my vote to Dr Banda, reporting his speeches with big headlines and big pictures.

But I also felt an obligation to report the rebel speeches and sent reporters into a remote tribal area hundreds of miles from the capital. I had their story translated from the local dialect, subbed it right down, and published it very briefly and (as I thought) inconspicuously under Banda's speech.

When this was done and the paper came out I was surprised to see that it was selling like hot cakes on every street corner. The Africans were bending over the front page, ignoring Banda's big picture and headlines, and reading the little item about Chipembere — and thereby giving me my first important lesson about journalism: *news is what governments don't want people to read.*

The episode didn't end there and I soon learned my second lesson in journalism — about the political pressures on an editor. The phone suddenly rang for me in my office — I was to report without delay to Dr Banda. He was livid, waving his arms about, threatening me with expulsion, and he sent me away with this stark warning ringing in my ears: "Keep out of my politics, white man!"

When I got back to my office, still shaken from this encounter, the phone rang again. The conversation went like this:

"Is that you, Bwana Editor? Chipembere here. I didn't like the coverage of my speech today."

"I gave you more coverage than was good for me, Mr Chipembere."

Silence on his part, then:

"Well, Bwana Editor, I would expect the powers that be to bring pressure to bear on you. But you mustn't think they're the only people who can bring pressure to bear."

Silence on my part, then (rather nervously):

"What do you mean, Mr Chipembere?"

"I'm sure you wouldn't like me to organise a boycott of your newspaper among the Africans. And I'm sure Lord Thomson wouldn't like anything to happen to his precious printing machinery."

Silence on my part, then (hesitantly):

"I'm sure you're above that sort of thing, Mr Chipembere."

Long silence on his part, then (rather firmly I thought):

"I wouldn't count on it, Bwana Editor."

After that sort of experience you'll appreciate that the occasional run-in with the law is mere child's play in comparison,

though I've now appeared as an editor before virtually all Britain's courts — from a magistrate's court to the Old Bailey, to the House of Lords and the European Court.

Not all my memories of that period in Africa are so menacing. I once went on a circulation tour, using a small plane, to the remote parts of the country and visited a small border town called Karonga.

I particularly wanted to visit Karonga, because we seemed to be selling a remarkable number of newspapers there. So many in fact, that the local agent, an African, had qualified several times for the bicycle I was offering as a reward for enterprise.

I found this wizard salesman in his small hut by the lake, and he told me his secret. The retail price of the paper was threepence. As an agent, he got it wholesale for twopence, then separated the sheets of the paper and sold each double-page spread for a penny to the local fishermen, who used them to wrap up their fish. It was the only source of paper in the area. With any bits that were left over, he cut out the pictures, especially pictures of Dr Banda, and sold them to the villagers as decorations for their huts. He was making a fortune: and not a single copy of the paper, as far as I could see, was being read!

Now, every editor has to get used to the idea that his paper will wrap tomorrow's fish and chips — but not today's, and not before the paper has even been read.

What could I do about this appalling situation? I decided to do nothing and flew out of Karonga the next day, leaving the agent secure with his secret monopoly. After all, he was happy enough, his customers were happy, I was happy to be selling so many papers.

One of the things this humbling experience taught me was that people sometimes buy newspapers for reasons that editors never think of, so we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously. ●

THIS is an extract from a speech delivered to the SAUJ in Durban.