Grit, silk and rum

It's one of those days when death wish and karma are in a rare and trenchant cosmic harmony, the day I interview Ken Owen. I've been asked as an independent journalist to write this piece, but for the past month or so, I have been working on contract for the *Sunday Times*, which Owen edits. It was, I reflect as I trundle down the long corridor that separates my own seedy corner of the newsroom from the holy of holies, indeed in a moment of foolish bravado that I accepted the commission.

You're meant to feel that kind of thing as you locomote through the hierarchical geography of the *Sunday Times*: Out from the democratic sprawl of the newsroom past the subs room and the second secretary; you come in due course to the private offices, belonging to the Assistant Editors, and then the Deputy Editor. With each door the atmosphere grows more rarefied. By the time you turn the corner to the suite of The Editor — appropriately buffered by the Editor's Secretary and overlooked by glum portraits of Eminent Predecessors — the carpeting is imperceptibly plusher, there are different patterns on the walls.

Meanwhile: my jeans have just split at the knee. Though I don't know it yet, when I pull out my pen, it is going to spit out great gobs of ink all over the coffee table. The batteries in my tape recorder — the batteries I changed that morning — are going to be flat, because I have left the rewind button on in my anxiety to get everything just so in readiness; I am going to have to borrow Ken Owen's for the occasion.

That kind of day. I've been working at the *Sunday Times* for just on a month, but this is the first time I've actually met him face to face. The Editor functions at some remove from the running of the newspaper. His words are carried down the corridors of the *Sunday Times* by deputies in hushed tones, passing out nuggets of praise here, grenades of blame there. Every second or third week, the Editor himself storms into the newsroom on a Saturday and, seemingly randomly, throws back a page just before the paper is scheduled to go to bed.

Ken Owen is nothing like the august setting and the omens would lead you to expect. One's first impression is of a somewhat awkward, self-deprecating (though not infrequently abrasive) shyness. His demeanour is almost insistently that of the common, no-nonsense, man on the street. The journalist editor, constitutionally somewhat at odds with the world of money and management, not the type that is to the cigars, port and wood panelling born, all social skills and business lunches and let somebody else write the editorials.

In point of fact Owen was born on the wrong side of the tracks. His father was a male nurse who later became a farmer and his mother a domestic worker of sorts. And he did come up the hard way, climbing through the ranks with nothing on his side but his skill as a writer — and though it was equally a burden, causing him to be fired on more than one occasion — his pugnacity.

But Owen has mellowed somewhat in recent years. While admittedly, he meets with senior staff almost daily, his hand is seldom directly felt in the day-to-day running of the newspaper.

"There are two reasons," he says. "One is that my health began to falter and I had to start protecting myself. I've had more and more symptoms from my heart in the past few years. The other is, of course, I'm getting ready to bale out and I will not have succeeded if it doesn't

sail on without a wobble when I leave. I've progressively shed responsibilities to other people over the past seven years. When I first got here I swarmed all over the place all the time. I still have a reasonable amount of control. I'm the only editor who knows what is happening on the sports pages, I'm the one editor who can tell you what to watch for in the ballet performance."

But it is pretty clear he also doesn't exactly hate the awe and fear his more distanced persona tends to inspire.

"There's a marvellous story that Wessel de Kock tells when he was working for the *Rand Daily Mail* in the sixties and he was covering a court case," Owen remembers. "One evening Rick Sowden [then editor] — who used to come to the office in the evening in a dinner jacket and black bow tie — came into the newsroom. This was a very rare occurrence, and all the journalists sort of stood around. And Dick Sowden looked a bit bewildered and he said: 'which one is De Kock?' So all the reporters pushed him forward. Rick Sowden looked down and said: 'The editor is pleased'. Then he walked out. Nowadays that kind of mystique has largely gone out of newspapers and maybe the fact that I'm a bit remote recreates that — though I don't do it deliberately."

You can believe that last disclaimer or not as you like. The thing is Ken Owen has always bulked somewhat larger than life. There are all those stories about his punching colleagues and hurling typewriters down stairwells or out of windows, about getting fired for brawling and for abusive drunkenness. That scar on his nose is the result of a knife fight it is said. Most of these stories are apocryphal, of course, or at best only half true. But in a way that is exactly the point: in the world of journalism, Owen has undoubtedly attained the kind of status where his memory is fitted out with the deferred truth of mythology.

One story that is at least in part true is the one about his being dismissed as founding editor of *Business Day* in 1985 — only three days after the title was launched. Management had lost confidence in his leadership. Owen was given the option of resigning — an option he exercised while Saan managing director Clive Kinsley, who moments earlier had fired him, was suavely eulogising Owen's wonderful contribution to the fledgling newspaper.

A year later, so the chronicle duly records, he was back at the helm on *Business Day,* for his third stint as an editor. According to some, the reason was that the board needed somebody to go down with what appeared at the time to be a sinking ship — and Owen, having edited the *Sunday Express* through the throes of its dying, was thought to possess the requisite credentials.

Whatever the reasons for his appointment, Owen did the impossible, turning the title around, raising readership to the niche market levels it needed in order to thrive in the market place — and, though this might have seemed secondary to those who gave him the job, making it, in many ways, the classiest and most credible newspaper act in town.

"My objective was no longer simply to produce a newspaper," Owen says, "but to try to rehabilitate South African English journalism. I could have produced in some ways a better newspaper, certainly one that would have done my own standing less harm, if I had not been determined to force people to become journalists."

It is a theme to which he returns from various angles, notably in tilting against Independent Newspapers' new *Sunday Independent.* "I'm striving towards better journalism because I think South African journalism is so appalling," he says. "The problem is to try to raise the level of writing, to make it more lucid and graceful and elegant. Shaun Johnson has taken the other way, he clips them out of British newspapers and puts them in. They read like silk, but it does nothing for South African journalism... and a hell of a little for the readership. They can pick up 30 000 people who used to live in Earl's Court and are nostalgic about British newspapers, you can always do that. But, really, is that here or there? It doesn't live in the same country that I live in and it doesn't face the same issues that I face."

The real challenge, Owen believes — despite the obvious relish with which he snipes at the *Independent* — lies at the other end of the spectrum.

So, Owen has gone out of his way to nurture and promote writers that do live in the same country. One of these is Mike Robertson, who, under Owen, has swiftly risen from political reporter to Assistant Editor responsible for political coverage, and who — despite the relative youth of his 30-something years — is generally believed to be the successor Owen would have chosen had the board displayed any real interest in his opinion on the succession. (It didn't of course; instead it approached Frederick van Zyl Slabbert of rent-an-expert, surely the least incendiary writer on the planet — who duly declined.)

Another, curiously enough since her style tends rather towards shimmering wit than the Owen trademark gravitas, is former *Weekly Mail* Arts Editor, Charlotte Bauer, recently given her own current affairs column and, at the time of writing, scheduled to take over a regular flagged page in the *Sunday Times.*

But despite the obvious relish with which Owen snipes at the *Independent* and his own concern with excellence in journalism, he understands well enough that the real game is being played on different terrain.

"If you look at the market, then one Sunday newspaper is exactly where it should be and that is *City Press.* That's where the growth is going to be. You can go downmarket and fight with *City Press,* which means that you're going to have to have a black editor and you change the product to account for the lower literacy and you lose all your white readers.

"The alternative is to redefine the market for the *Sunday Times* and run across all race groups and try to hold an elite market. That implies in each community an elite readership... I think there is a market there and it's a permanent one. It may shrink a bit and I took that risk when I started out."

Actually the *Sunday Times*' readership grew substantially after Owen took over in 1990, peaking at 568 000, then gradually dropping into the 400 000s — a more comfortable level, he insists, high enough for advertising, but avoiding excessive losses on cover price and distribution.

His real pride though is in people: "When I was appointed, they just had me, they didn't have any choice. When Joel Mervis left it was a choice between Johnny Johnson and Tertius Myburgh, there had been no development of people. Both on *Business Day* and here what I've set out to do is to create a set of people. Now as I leave, there are half a dozen prospective editors who could take over from me."

Perhaps. But in another way they certainly couldn't. The stamp of Owen's journalistic personality is as powerful as it is eccentric. You have to travel great distances to find a professional journalist who doesn't admire the man's writing, who doesn't envy his command of language and the force of his argumentation. You have to travel just as far in the other direction to find somebody who usually agrees with what he is actually saying. Everybody though reads the weekly column he has been writing since his time on *Business Day.* In truth Owen's viewpoints are frequently as bizarre as they are occasionally refreshing. He is for instance not above suggesting the entire Arts and Culture and Science and Technology ministry should be dissolved — mainly, it would appear, on the grounds that those who want to see opera do not deserve subsidy, they should be paying for it themselves. There is no acknowledgement of any problems associated with redistribution of resources or any need for cultural development, or anything that one would expect a responsible commentator at least to nod at. By the same token, it should be noted, he allowed his newspaper to publish a long interview with Minister Ben Ngubane in which his views on the subject were systematically trashed.

Owen has also been guilty of pursuing incomprehensible vendettas in print. One such was against the late Joe Slovo at whom he tilted week after week with all the enthusiasm of a Don Quixote charging at a windmill — and to about as much purpose. Joe Slovo was riding the gravy train because he possessed a Health and Racquet Club membership card. (Never mind that it was Joe Slovo who single-handedly prevented the pre-elections Transitional Executive Committee from leaving aside all other business to deal with the really important thing: voting immediate and substantial pay rises for TEC members.) Red Joe was speaking with forked tongue when he rejected communist centralism because... well just because Ken Owen knew he was.

But then, by his own admission Owen's writing is geared to "sharpening the conflict, making it as rum as I can.

"Then I get clobbered back and that is okay. Somebody asked me: 'do I enjoy getting clobbered?' and no I don't enjoy it, but I can stand it. To me the worst column is the one that everybody ignores, where it doesn't get any letters, it doesn't make anybody angry."

But does he actually believe the stuff he writes? If, six months after it was published, he reads his own copy, does he still agree with what it says?

"No of course not!" Owen practically exclaims. "No, although I'm sometimes impressed with myself. I sometimes say: 'Hell I used to be able to write'. But sometimes I think: 'Jeez that was bloody stupid'."

You can't quite get him to say this but it is all part of a culture of debate and criticism that lies at the heart of Ken Owen's very special version of "liberalism".

"I read, in the *Wall Street Journal,* a piece by Irving Crystal," he recalls. "He claimed that the neo-conservatives had recreated in the United States the word capitalism, they'd rehabilitated it . At that time I'd just read Nadine Gordimer's comment that liberalism on South African campuses was as dead as a dodo. And I thought,

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I wonder if you could rehabilitate liberalism in South Africa."

The answer was "obviously not". The history of liberalism in South Africa, at least since the days of Alan Paton's Liberal Party was, at the time that Owen was wanting to revive the notion, one of mealy-mouthed double standards, of salving a public conscience while, so to speak, not rocking the boat wherein rested the goose of apartheid that laid the golden egg.

So Owen went ahead and did it anyway. "Maybe I could pull it off," he remembers thinking, "in the context of one hell of a fight." Under the white flag of liberalism, and as reinstated editor of *Business Day*, he went for the collective jugular defending individual liberties against the collective, the free market against all arguments tending to affirmative action, the right to freedom of speech against all censorship — all with about as much liberal tolerance as you could expect from an attack-trained Rottweiler.

"That became the fight, that became the thing that gave *Business Day* an identity and a label and made it relevant to people other than stockbrokers. People began to talk about it, it actually saved the newspaper."

It did more than just that though. It also created or at least imaged a muscularity in the traditionally flabby South African political middle ground. We tend to forget this now, but it was neither easy nor fashionable in the mid-1980s to position oneself as an independent individualist in South Africa. The battle lines were drawn and the struggle was being waged on mythological as well as practical fronts; it was a time which presented itself as demanding that one take sides. And in the ever-sharpening conflict around versions of reality, journalism was increasingly an activist pursuit. You either excused and sought to prop up the old regime or you sought to bring it down: truth was at less of a premium than the essentially propagandist usefulness of information in the service of the particular point of view.

Against the grain, Owen's critical liberalism stridently reasserted an alternative — usually conservative to be sure, but nevertheless possessed of a force, conviction and integrity that made it appear to be of a different order from the polite and uncommitted liberalism characteristic of the mainstream English language press at large. It would be too much to claim that Owen's journalism either galvanised or has given voice to the motley lobby of dissent in South African affairs.

Still, on *Business Day*, and later, as he pursued the same agendas on the far more powerful *Sunday Times*, the democracy of Owen's dislikes has incontestably contributed to sustaining a climate of dissent and debate in our changing society. As the political lines have been redrawn, as the traditional "left" of the ANC takes on the mantle of government, it is increasingly at the centre that the voices of dissent are most stridently to be heard; the committed liberal humanists — like Ken Owen and his one-time arch enemy Archbishop Desmond Tutu — are the ones who bark as watchdogs of morality and value — and occasionally growl.

It was this uncompromising public identity which made Ken Owen in many ways — his protestations of being the only possibility aside — a curious choice as editor of the *Sunday Times* in the first place. Under Tertius Myburgh, his immediate predecessor — who left, it should be remembered, with the intention of taking up a senior position in the old National Party government — the newspaper had developed a deserved reputation for (at best) a craven kind of conservatism, alternating sleaze, salaciousness, pro-government apologias, and very little else.

Under Ken Owen it has, gradually, become something different, still sensationalist to be sure, but backed by solid political analysis and — though largely by default — more likely these days to break important stories than any other newspaper around. It has also grown distinctly ill-mannered towards those in power — to the point where national leaders, from

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Nelson Mandela to Gauteng Premier Tokyo Sexwale, have paid the highest compliment politicians can to its independence: they have complained of "negativity" and anti-government bias.

Like many another observer of the media, Owen believes that a "helluva fight is brewing" over the freedom of the press. There is much talk in the air these days about "constructive" journalism and of rapprochement between government and the media. There is also a good deal of uneasiness expressed at intervals about a perceived disproportionality in the economic and editorial power still exercised by whites in the media sector. Conversely there is much reference these days to the supposed need for affirmative intervention by and on behalf of black interests and perspectives.

In short, the portents are accumulating of imminent government intervention in the functioning of the press in the post-elections society. It is unsurprising that this should be the case. There certainly exist elements within the governing ANC who remember with fondness the control effortlessly exercised over the press in places like Zambia. It also needs to be acknowledged that many of the ANC's leaders, accustomed to the adulation of the world and to something like leasehold on the moral high ground, are proving noticeably thin-skinned in the hurly burly of media criticism.

Such considerations aside, however, it remains true that whites do exercise disproportionate power in the non-statutory media. Bluntly, the mainstream media continue to be owned and effectively controlled by an economic establishment that flourished under apartheid, and they continue to be, if not actually hostile to the ANC-led government, at least deeply suspicious of its bona fides.

"The ANC needs its own mouthpiece," Owen notes. "But the danger is there are moves to hijack existing titles with working infrastructures."

To use his own word, the situation grows increasingly rum. Owen responded at first characteristically — by getting ready for a fight.

"I almost withdrew my retirement," he says. "I thought I needed to see the fight through to the end.

"Then I realised it was a young man's fight and I must let the younger editors take it on board... people like Anton Harber, I have faith they will see it through."

There is real poignancy in the disclaimer of responsibility for the future. Nor is it only the fuzzy sentiment that lights up the scene where the old fighter finally accepts mortality and hangs up his gloves. There is also a starker underlying truth. Editors of mainstream publications are tainted from the outset in the eyes of the new society. They will not be free of the perception that they did too little to resist the depredations of the apartheid regime, that they never stopped being "white" in their perspective and the way they looked at South Africa. Certainly among black politicians, the sense is that the mainstream press failed to register with any conviction or authority during the 1980s the realities of the townships or of black life; they failed signally, in the words of the *Star's* unfortunate slogan to tell it like it was. Instead papers like the *Star* and the *Sunday Times* tended to write to a white readership, they tended to believe the National Party government's version of events and, perhaps more importantly, they tended to embrace the perspectives of the suburbs rather than those of the townships.

There will be accusations — indeed contemporary history is writing them in the trial of the generals as I write to the effect that, either through simple ignorance or willed blindness, the mainstream press failed in the dying years of the apartheid regime to see the obvious.

Week after week the independents, notably *Vrye Weekblad* and the *Weekly Mail*, came up with allegations around dirty tricks in the war against the ANC and more specifically around collusion between agents of the government and the IFP — both on the Witwatersrand and in KwaZulu Natal.

Week after week the mainstream press either ignored the evidence or seemed intent upon trashing the articles that ran in the alternative press.

"I was convinced that in Natal both sides were equally murderous," Owen says. "What seemed to me was that the ANC was moving in on local Inkatha members and I wasn't surprised when they fought back. Whether you saw it as part of a Third Force as it later became known or whether you saw it as part of a murderous battle, I think was a matter of perspective.

"It was that vision that actually blinded me to the conspiracy that came. So sure there's an historical judgement of failure to be made on this, but I don't think it was a contemptible failure."

Nevertheless, as the Truth Commission sits, as the Trial of the Generals unfolds, as the Eugene de Kock trial draws to its conclusion — as the society revisits its suppressed and unwritten past — the fact of the failure will loom as the important thing. The credibility of the mainstream press in those years will certainly be called, seriously, into question. I do not believe that anybody would seriously accuse Ken Owen of collusion. After all, he is on record as the first journalist to pick up on the Info scandal, working at it for close on a decade before it finally broke, under another journalist's byline. So too, as editor of the *Sunday Express*, he presided fearlessly over almost monotonously regular exposes of government corruption.

No, this is not the point. The point is simply that, like nearly all of his generation's press, he did not see or would not believe what was going on. He was still part of the white world's press, and so too was the liberalism he espoused part of the old South Africa's moral firmament.

And, yes, he is right, it is a young man's fight. Many of the moves, though — the body blows, the hooks, not to mention the odd headbutt — will have been learnt from tapes of Ken Owen's fights.

Ivor Powell is a freelance writer working under contract on the Sunday Times