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MARALINGA AND THE JOURNALISTS :

Covering the bomb tests over generations

A compulsive reader, flipping idly through copies of old newspapers, could be forgiven the odd shudder of disbelief if he chanced across coverage of the British A-bomb tests in Australia during the 1950s.

*Adrian Tame and F P J Robotham,
Maralinga: British A-Bomb Australian Legacy, 1982*

The British nuclear bomb test program held in Australia in the 1950s and early 1960s is a fascinating tale of nuclear colonialism that also reveals a generational change in how journalists approach a big science story. The test series included especially dangerous scientific experiments that left significant radioactive contamination at the Maralinga desert test site in South Australia. The nuclear tests are among the most significant events in this nation's history *not* to have been subjected to media scrutiny and analysis befitting their importance until many years after they took place. Without media scrutiny, government activities do not become part of public discussion and informed public consent cannot be given. While this case study shows firstly how media practitioners in the 1950s and 1960s who were not attuned to science in public affairs failed to report and interpret the test series, it also shows generational change in the capacity of the Australian media to deal with challenging scientific and technological subjects. The journalists from the later era of bomb test coverage, particularly between 1978 and 1993, did a far better job of making the Australian government accountable for the extraordinary events at Maralinga than the earlier generation. By then, those journalists who took on the Maralinga story had developed greater knowledge and understanding of the importance of science in the public sphere. This evolutionary process led to a more probing, investigative culture in the later generation of reporters and far greater capacity to report the bomb tests in full.

The British nuclear test program was spread over 11 years, from 1952 to 1963, and took place at three locations: the Monte Bello Islands off the coast of Western Australia, and Emu Field and Maralinga in the South Australian desert. A total of 12 'mushroom cloud'¹ bombs were exploded; three at Monte Bello, two at Emu Field and five at Maralinga. The nuclear tests that had more far reaching significance than the mushroom clouds, however, were the radiological experiments known as Vixen B that were only held at Maralinga. These dangerous experiments involved blowing up the longest-lived isotope of plutonium using conventional explosives and leaving most of the residue on the open range. The form of plutonium used in these tests has a half-life of over 24,000 years; it takes 24,000 years for half of its radioactivity to decay, then another 24,000 years for half of the remaining radiation

to decay, and so on. This extreme persistence of radiation and the threat of cancer posed by inhaling the small particles in dust at the site make this substance especially dangerous. The Vixen B tests took place amid extreme secrecy in 1960, 1961 and 1963, arguably in defiance of an international moratorium on weapons testing. These tests received no media coverage at all until the late-1970s. The Vixen B tests were only fully uncovered in a landmark piece of scientific investigative journalism published in 1993.

Media coverage of the British nuclear tests began with the first test in October 1952 at the Monte Bello Islands, and would evolve over time until the late 1950s. Although the British test program continued until April 1963, media coverage effectively ended with the last of the 'major trials' bombs in 1957. The first few bomb tests were subjected to specific 'D-notices' ('Defence notices') that provided non-enforceable guidelines on what the media were able to report in relation to the bomb tests, and other specified issues of national security. Australian media responded willingly to the new D-notices put in place in 1952 (just before the first atomic test) by the Australian government, based on the long-standing British D-notice system. The D-notice system was the start of a new relationship of co-operation between the government and the media; a relationship that was to prove significant for the smooth operation of the British nuclear tests, and indeed for the program of British rocket tests underway at the nearby Woomera range. Arguably, the willingness of the Australian media to self-censor through the D-notice system resulted in highly restrained coverage of the atomic test series, with implications for later public access to crucial information about the risks and aftermath of the test series. The output of the media at the time also indicates a notably limited understanding of the scientific and technological aspects of the bomb tests, and their political ramifications. Nevertheless, the British atomic test program was a story of interest to the Australian media and they responded to the promptings of the test authorities when media information was made available. Coverage ebbed and flowed during the test program, coming to a crescendo in 1956 before dropping away to nothing well before the tests ended.

The UK atomic test authorities sought to manage media coverage as part of the propaganda war with the Soviet Union. Indeed, they deputed spokespeople as important and senior as head of the UK Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, Sir William Penney, and Australia's Minister for Supply Howard Beale to present the official line at media conferences or in feature articles and broadcasts. According to a British official quoted in the Royal Commission Report:

If we are to secure the full benefit of the fact that we have been able to produce an atomic weapon on our own we would do well to see that the press...have adequate information about the [Hurricane] test. On the other hand the trial is the first scientific test of a new British weapon in its experimental form. Success cannot be guaranteed and failure in public even if temporary would be damaging (Royal Commission "Vol. 2", 462).

While wanting to harness the power of the media to influence public opinion, both the British and the Australian test authorities were wary of this power and saw it as a force to be contained. With only a few exceptions, it was contained during the time of atomic testing in Australia. This era is an example of exceptionally successful media management, in which the official line presented by the test authorities and both the UK and Australian governments dominated media output.

One of the most striking features of the contemporary coverage of the tests was the reliance on official sources. While this form of information has its place, total reliance upon it is anathema to the principles of an independent 'fourth estate' style of media. A lack of confidence in tackling the multiple forms of specialised information – scientific, technological, security, military, political – inherent in atomic bomb testing is one explanation for differences in reporting styles between the two eras. This meant that the 1950's media found themselves incapable of overcoming the high official stone wall.

Added to this was the fact that the 1950's Australian media were largely conservative and sympathetic to the Liberal-Country Party coalition of Prime Minister Robert Menzies:

Even the popular press was conservative in outlook, and much of the journalism produced constrained by a commitment to reporting the pronouncements of prominent men with little space provided for context, background or comment (Schultz qtd in Cunningham and Turner 106).

A dearth of information makes for poor public communication and therefore weaker democratic processes, and the media are often the sole source of material by which the public can assess events. The tools normally or ideally available to the public to assess the actions of governments were absent and made the acceptance of the official line almost a foregone conclusion. An examination by Dieter Michel of the opening up of public discourse on the British nuclear tests, from the late 1970s onwards, represented a 'bifurcation of [the] single official version [of the tests]' – a version that had been uniformly positive for years but which was overturned in the later era.

British authorities filtered all information the Australian government received on the tests, including safety measures...Needless to say, the culture of secrecy was extended to the representation of the trials in the media. Accordingly, throughout the 1950s the trials attracted little public dissent (Michel 222).

The report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests, prepared by the Chair Justice James McClelland and released in 1985, repeatedly emphasised the manipulation of the media throughout the nuclear tests, finding that the absence of public information constituted a significant and negative part of the atomic tests legacy. The Royal Commission report concluded:

The Australian Government had no intention of testing public reaction before deciding to agree to provide a permanent proving ground at Maralinga; no announcement was allowed until there was a formal commitment (Royal Commission "Conclusions and Recommendations" 8).

The atomic age arrived when nuclear bombs were dropped by the US on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, heralding what seemed to be an even more dangerous era than that of the world war that was just ending. In the atomic age, the British sought to develop their own nuclear weaponry but were unable to continue working with the United States government on nuclear weaponry because of spy scandals that led the US to make the sharing of nuclear secrets with other nations illegal. A decision was taken by the British to shift its atomic weapons testing activities to Australia. The relationship between the British and the Australians in this project was always in essence a master-servant relationship, with the UK in charge and Australia providing the site, the political backing and some of the logistics and military personnel. Australia was also expected to manage at least some aspects of the media liaison around the tests, primarily through the Australian Department of Supply and its Minister, Howard Beale. Much of the media coverage of the tests at the time, until 1957, was derived from material provided by Beale and his Department, as he recalled in his later autobiography:

...[i]t was the task of the scientists, including the Australian scientists, to make sure that the tests were safely conducted, and it was my department's task to give all required assistance and to keep the public informed. When it was announced that the test would take place, there was little public anxiety; indeed there was some pride that Australia was to participate in this historic event (Beale 79).

Indeed, reports of the Hurricane test were notably favourable, even laudatory. Media coverage of Operation Hurricane in October 1952 was the first opportunity for the test authorities to interact with the Australian media and the inherent caution evident in all their dealings was at its most obvious at this time. Requests from media organisations for journalists to join the official party that witnessed the test were denied, after initial consideration. (Royal Commission "Vol. 2" 461.) Nevertheless, some media set up their cameras at Mount Potter, 88km from the test site. (Royal Commission "Vol. 2" 461). From there they captured images of the explosion of the first ever British atomic bomb and ran them prominently in a number of newspapers – a clear sign that keeping the huge mushroom clouds out of the media was going to be impossible.

The Hurricane test was a single atomic bomb detonated aboard a Royal Navy frigate, making the UK the world's third nuclear power after the US and the Soviet Union. A typical newspaper response can be seen in an editorial from the *West Australian*, which stated:

The real significance of the Monte Bello explosion [Hurricane] lies at this moment...in the simple fact that it occurred. It gives the world

the indisputable proof that Britain has the material, the skill and the installations for the independent production of atomic weapons and that she will yield the initiative to none (qtd in Crowley 265).

This lengthy editorial continued in the same vein, talking about “profound satisfaction” and “a strong sense of pride”, reflecting the tone of much of the Hurricane coverage. It concluded,

...the Monte Bello explosion reverberates with a vastly increased assurance of British Commonwealth power and defensive security (qtd in Crowley 265).

The Royal Commission into the British nuclear tests would later conclude that:

There was virtually complete government control of the Australian media reporting of the Hurricane test and the lead-up to it, thus ensuring that the Australian news media reported only what the UK government wished (Conclusions and Recommendations 7).

Although rigid controls had been placed upon atomic test information, the momentum of media interest was building by the time of the first major test at remote Emu Field in the South Australian desert. The two detonations in the series took place in October 1953, the first in the presence of a party of journalists. Media organisations had again placed pressure on the test authorities to allow them to witness the event, this time with more success.

The tone of media coverage of the Totem tests was similar to that of the Hurricane coverage. One example was an editorial in the *Sunday Herald*, 11 days before the first Totem shot:

British genius has developed the atomic weapons...as part of the free world's efforts to defend itself. It so happens that we in Australia have the uninhabited spaces where they can be tried out. In placing the rocket range area at Britain's disposal, we are aiding in our own protection and that of the whole British Commonwealth. This provision of a site is a contribution we are in a unique position to make, and nobody abroad should suppose that we are not making it freely and cheerfully (“Atom bombs in our arid lands” 2).

The Sydney Morning Herald ran the story of the first Totem test in detail, covering its front page with a lead story, sidebar stories and photo series showing the mushroom cloud rising from the desert plain. The article was written by “A ‘Herald’ Special Reporter, Who Watched the Atomic Explosion on the Woomera Range from 15 Miles Away”; a unique byline. This *Herald* special reporter provided some vivid imagery:

At zero hour, the flash lit up the sky, despite the bright, sunny Central

Australian morning. In the first two seconds, a huge ball of fire rose about 750 feet, oxides of nitrogen forming and remaining in the air. Colours, mainly brown and red, flamed. In these sweeping two seconds, as the flames shot upwards, several of the observers noted the face of an Australian aboriginal formed by the soaring flames ("Atom Explosion Success: Dawn Blast at Woomera" 1).

A less awe-struck perspective on that account was supplied later by the knockabout bushman, Len Beadell, hired by the Australian government to survey the Emu Field site before its use in the test program. Beadell witnessed Totem One and was to write later:

Old Luke [a member of Beadell's surveying team] had a little joke waiting at this stage for the reporters. 'Look,' he shouted pointing at the atomic cloud, 'do you see it?' Everyone whipped around to direct their attention to the cloud. 'A perfect portrait of a myall blackfeller written with atomic dust; the new and old have come together today.' He was so enthusiastically serious that one by one they agreed that there was no doubt about it. Sure enough the newspapers printed the huge headlines: 'Myall black man written by atomic dust in sky over Emu.' Good old Luke (Beadell 210-1).

Also present in the press party that witnessed Totem was the prominent British *Daily Express* journalist Chapman Pincher who, on this occasion, contributed an article to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Pincher also provided a vivid word picture of the event:

...peering through welders' safety goggles, I watched [the explosion] swell into a tremendous fireball – a miniature manmade sun which rose away from the red sand like a giant balloon. A minute later I was shaken by a terrific shock wave – a hot blast that sent a double thunder clap rumbling around the desert for 30 seconds. As the fireball expanded it gave off a second burst of light more brilliant than the sun (Pincher 1).

On 17 May 1955, a story announcing the selection of a permanent test site at Maralinga that appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* seemed almost entirely composed of Howard Beale's public relations material: ("Australian Atomic Test Site" 2) The absence of direct quotes or indirect attribution for assertions is one notable feature, as is its laudatory language:

[At Maralinga] will be tested the latest types of atom bombs which have been developed by Sir William Penney and his brilliant team of British scientists. These will incorporate the latest devices of British skill and ingenuity ("Australian Atomic Test Site" 2).

The media management effort maintained a remarkable level of co-operation, even when

the tests were losing public support. The government authorities charged with managing the media seemed to know exactly what they were doing. As the Secretary of the Australian government's Department of Supply, Frank O'Connor, rather wistfully wrote to the chief information officer for the UK Department of Supply, Iyer Jehu, on 9 November 1956, "[l]ooking at it philosophically, we have to recognize this is just part and parcel of the democratic set up" (O'Connor, letter to Iyer Jehu) O'Connor said:

My own view of the press is that it is imperative to have good relations with them, but as to whether our relationships are good or bad is a matter that is mainly in our own hands (O'Connor, letter to Iyer Jehu).

Given that the Australian media were carrying out virtually no independent enquiry into the tests at the time, despite the first hints of rising public disquiet both in Australia and internationally about atomic testing, O'Connor appears to be correct in his assertion that press acquiescence was largely a matter of government handling.

By the time of the final major Maralinga test series, Operation Antler in 1957, public opinion had hardened towards the tests generally and the world was moving towards new treaties that would limit what atomic testing was allowed. The Federal Opposition was increasingly opposed to the tests and questions were being asked in Parliament about their continuation. Bipartisan political support for the tests collapsed in 1956, in the wake of the controversial second Mosaic test at Monte Bello, a bomb of huge yield that had sent a cloud of radiation over the Australian mainland and had raised questions among some journalists and opposition politicians about whether it was really a hydrogen bomb (it was not).

The Maralinga atomic test site was commissioned at exactly the time the political and public status of the British nuclear tests program was becoming less clear-cut and more problematic for Australia. The official planned media activities connected to the atomic weapons test series reached their highest point during 1956. After the Antler series in 1957, all public information about Maralinga effectively shut down and secrecy was to become absolute. Keeping the later plutonium experiments secret was easier because they were not as visual as the mushroom clouds. They were also rather boringly like scientific experiments and less like thrilling big bomb blasts with miniature suns and people's faces in the cloud. The most dangerous work of the British atomic test series was about to begin in the strictest secrecy. Outside the government, no-one in Australia would know about Vixen B for many years.

By the late 1970s there had been a marked change in how the Australian media covered the British nuclear tests. The coverage of this later era is characterised by a determination to discover the exact nature of the events at Maralinga some years before, in contrast to contemporary media activity that was tightly controlled by the secrecy agenda of government authorities. The relevant laws had not changed and the D-notice system was still in place. However, the Maralinga case study indicates that the Australian media had dropped its Menzies era compliance and was nurturing some influential and resourceful investigative

journalists who were not interested in following the official line.

In the mid-1970s Maralinga started to be closely scrutinised in the public arena for the first time. Momentum began to build around the time that the left-wing ALP politician and then deputy leader of the opposition Tom Uren asked a question of the Minister for Defence, Jim Killen, in Parliament on 9 December 1976. This question challenged the ongoing Maralinga secrecy, particularly surrounding the Vixen B tests:

Is it true that, during the moratorium on nuclear weapons testing between 1958 and 1961, Australia co-operated with the British on conducting secret atomic 'trigger' tests at Maralinga and that waste and debris from these tests were buried at Maralinga? (House of Representatives 3574).

At the same time, Uren issued a public statement saying:

During [the test] moratorium period the Australian government co-operated with the British government to secretly carry out certain atomic tests in the Maralinga area...The explosions caused by these tests were so small that they could escape public scrutiny and international detection (qtd Milliken 263).

These tantalising pieces of information were pointing to a mystery at Maralinga that would take a little longer to fully emerge. The only media outlets that made substantial reference to possible plutonium contamination were the two main Adelaide papers, *The Advertiser* in a sequence of stories between 3 and 10 December 1976, and *The News* in a prominent article on 17 December 1976. *The Advertiser* ran a story based on the revelations of Maralinga veteran Avon Hudson:

Mr Avon Hudson, of Balaklava, broke 15 years silence last night [during an interview on ABC Radio] to talk of his role in what he called a dumping ground for radioactive waste from Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s ("Nuclear waste dump in SA: ex-RAAF man" 1).

Further stories ran in *The Advertiser* on 4, 9 and 10 December 1976. The coverage was prominent and extensive, including on 9 December two large, linked stories on page 1. One of these, by science writer Barry Hailstone, was among the first to bring some scientific fact into the coverage of the plutonium at Maralinga.

Around the same time, the acting Deputy Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs Roy Fernandez sent a secret teletype message to his Minister Andrew Peacock that spelled out the then Coalition government's growing fears about the media's interest in what was left at Maralinga, especially as Australia pursued a place internationally as a miner and exporter of

uranium. The claims by Avon Hudson reported in the media were causing high-level concern.

The opening up of the issue of the burial of atomic waste carries serious implications (Fernandez, "Teletype Message to Andrew Peacock").

Fernandez spelled out these implications under Australia's agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure that it provided an inventory of all fissionable materials in Australia and to guarantee that no such materials could be used for the manufacture of weapons. The possibility of this story becoming a serious and potentially damaging problem for the federal government was well known to insiders:

Both the delicate stage reached in the current uranium debate and the possibility that the safety criteria applying 15 to 20 years ago to the storage of plutonium might not be acceptable in the climate of to-day's opinion are good reasons both for avoiding excessive publicity and at the same time not allowing unwarranted speculation to develop around the Maralinga situation (Fernandez, "Teletype Message to Andrew Peacock").

In February 1977, Defence Minister Killen wrote to Uren saying that there was no evidence to substantiate the existence of plutonium contamination at the site, (Milliken 264) a position that was already on shaky ground and one that Killen would later have to retract. The rumblings continued and a storm seemed to be coming. On 31 March 1977, Killen rose again in the House of Representatives to answer a question on notice from the ALP's Bill Hayden about the test series at Maralinga. Killen provided a basic list of the major bomb trials at all three test sites from October 1952 to October 1957, with no indication that he was aware of the plutonium experiments or any information on when and where they had been held.

What began the December before with Uren's question in parliament and the Adelaide media interest gathered pace and Killen was forced to look more closely at the issue. One of the most significant outcomes of the new scrutiny of the Maralinga issue was a secret Cabinet submission tabled on 11 September 1978 and titled "Plutonium Buried Near Maralinga Airfield". This submission raised a potential security problem for the Australian government:

It would not appear difficult for a small party of determined men who had received information to recover the substance in a single quick operation if they were willing to take large risks to themselves. They could then threaten, say, to exploit the extremely toxic properties of plutonium against the population of a major city (Killen, "Plutonium Buried Near Maralinga Airfield").

This secret submission was to become central to the journalistic uncovering of Maralinga. The federal government was reluctant to open this issue for public scrutiny and there were active attempts to limit media access. The contents of the document were not intended to be

made public, as the government moved to organise a reconnaissance mission to the site to investigate exactly what was there and how it could be removed:

The precise purpose of the reconnaissance should not be announced. If it were necessary to make public reference to the reconnaissance party, some formulation such as 'review of physical security measures and possible need for maintenance work' might be used. A public statement would need to be made about the exhumation/repatriation operation: timing and text would require discussion with the British (Killen, "Plutonium Buried Near Maralinga Airfield").

The long-established method of stonewalling media scrutiny or diverting attention by formulating an acceptably bland and uninformative public statement in relation to the atomic tests was still operating, though was soon to become obsolete.

If they wanted to keep the story out of the public domain, Killen and his Department reckoned without the efforts of one of Australia's leading investigative journalists, the then-33 year old Brian Toohey. Toohey had been a political correspondent for the *Australian Financial Review* since 1973, and was later to become Washington correspondent and then editor of *The National Times* in 1982 (Toohey and Wilkinson).

Toohey's story in the *Australian Financial Review* of 5 October 1978 was based upon the leaked Defence Department Cabinet submission. Headlined "Killen warns on plutonium pile" and with the sub-heading "Terrorist threat to British atomic waste", (Toohey, "Killen warns on plutonium pile" 1&6) the page one story revealed the ticking time bomb of Maralinga. Toohey noted the admission that the Menzies government in particular had not demanded sufficient safeguards at Maralinga:

The [Cabinet] submission ... makes clear that Australian Governments in the past have taken an extremely lenient attitude towards the existence of the Maralinga plutonium through its nuclear weapons tests in Australia in the 1950s (Toohey, "Killen warns on plutonium pile" 1&6).

Toohey concluded:

It is now 20 years since the tests finished. The fall-out, however, is still a very live issue in British-Australian relations however much both Governments want to keep the negotiations entailed in last Thursday's Cabinet submission a closely guarded secret (Toohey, "Killen warns on plutonium pile" 1&6).

Toohey's follow-up story on 11 October 1978 hit harder still. This article, titled "Maralinga: The 'do nothing' solution", (Toohey, "Maralinga: The 'do nothing' solution" 1, 10 & 37) brought the wrath

of Defence Minister Killen down on Toohey's head. The story questioned the Australian government's response in light of a statement issued by the British High Commission on 10 October that nothing needed to be done (Toohey, "Maralinga: The 'do nothing' solution" 1, 10 & 37). The British stance had been backed by a supportive statement from the Australian Acting Foreign Affairs Minister Ian Sinclair, who played down any risks. Toohey was not deterred, particularly as the Cabinet submission had made strong statements about the terrorist threat that the material at Maralinga posed.

Upon publication of Toohey's second Maralinga story, Killen denounced Toohey in Parliament. Specifically, he accused Toohey and the *Financial Review* of issuing an invitation to terrorists to help themselves to the dangerous material at Maralinga. He said:

It is a day for regret when a journalist and a newspaper, aided by a criminal act, have published a story that is against the interest of the nation and its people (qtd Milliken 265).

Killen's outburst in Parliament was reported in the stablemate Fairfax broadsheet the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 12 October 1978:

[Killen] said a report in the *Financial Review* 'written by one of that paper's employees [Brian Toohey]' has stated that he suggested there might be no need to do anything other than upgrade the police guard at Maralinga. 'I said no such thing and suggested no such thing [on 10 October],' Mr Killen said.... 'This is a pernicious, wicked and odious technique that has long been practised by this man,' Mr Killen said... 'The person concerned with the report wouldn't be capable of accurately reporting a minute's silence,' Mr Killen said ("Killen attacks *Review* report" 9).

Toohey was not deterred and prepared two more stories in this series for the *Australian Financial Review* published on 12 October and 13 October, opening new angles. The 12 October story referred to Killen's attack. Killen is quoted as saying:

It is characteristic of a certain kind of so-called journalism in this country that certain sections of my Cabinet submission were reported accurately, while other parts were selected for distortion to contrive a mixture that would create a sensational impact and alarm the public (qtd in Toohey, "Govt may exhume plutonium waste", 1, 10 & 14).

The Sydney Morning Herald assigned reporters to travel to Maralinga and investigate what was there. Killen had been reported as saying that he had had to urgently upgrade security at the site, because of the Toohey article, which he had characterised as an open invitation to terrorists.

When journalists flew in there was no sign of the increased security measures announced on Thursday night [5 October] to guard a buried lump of plutonium from terrorists...When told of this yesterday the guards at Maralinga just chuckled ("The usual four guard the plutonium").

Analysis by journalist Peter Bowers from the *Sydney Morning Herald* took stock of the frenetic activity since the Toohey story had broken:

We have learned more about what is buried at Maralinga in the past week than in the past 20 years. And there is much more yet to be learned about the Maralinga caper (Bowers 7).

Brian Toohey had set in motion years of media scrutiny of the legacy of Maralinga. Toohey maintained an interest in the Maralinga story for some time after this high profile conflict with the Defence Minister. He had moved to *The National Times* in 1982, where he continued to specialise in national interest political and defence reporting. Several months before the McClelland Royal Commission into the British nuclear tests began but with the issue now well-established in the media, Toohey wrote a feature titled "Plutonium on the wind: The terrible legacy of Maralinga". (Toohey, "Plutonium on the wind: The terrible legacy of Maralinga" 3-5) This was a detailed summing up of the Vixen B experiments, with full weight given to the relevant science, in a way that had not been done before in the media. One of the points of difference between the 1950s and 1960s media coverage and the later coverage was the ease with which later journalists dealt with the scientific and technological aspects of the story. Toohey was not a specialist science reporter, but recognised the importance of obtaining at least a rudimentary understanding of the science to ensure that the resulting story could stand up to the scrutiny of experts.

Toohey's *National Times* feature is an early, detailed examination of the Vixen B trials and contains much information that had, until then, not appeared publicly:

It would seem that what the British and Australian authorities described as minor experiments in fact involved the cavalier dispersal of plutonium and have created a far greater health hazard at Maralinga than the full-scale atomic tests (Toohey, "Plutonium on the wind: The terrible legacy of Maralinga" 5).

A new Federal Government came to office on 5 March 1983 under the leadership of the ALP's Bob Hawke. For the first 18 months of this government, the minister responsible for dealing with the Maralinga aftermath was Senator Peter Walsh in his role as Minister for Mines and Energy. He was forced to act as the issue became increasingly prominent in the Australian media, despite his reluctance to set up a royal commission. He agreed that there was a case to answer:

What the British Government did at Maralinga was irresponsible to say the least. The Australian Government, which eagerly invited the British to do it, was even more culpable (Walsh, 95).

The McClelland Royal Commission began in Sydney on 22 August 1984. During the months that the Royal Commission was taking evidence, the British nuclear tests maintained a high profile throughout the mainstream media, with many publications assigning reporters to attend the hearings. The Royal Commission, described as ‘a spectacle of national revenge’ (Turner, 429), was highly critical of the tests and many of the people involved with them. By now, the British nuclear tests were no longer protected from public scrutiny.

The landmark *New Scientist* story by Ian Anderson in 1993 perhaps provides the starkest contrast of all with the stories by the 1950’s and 1960’s media. By June 1993 Australia had a strong and growing workforce of science media specialists and science literacy was more clearly part of the range of knowledge cultivated by national affairs reporters generally. As a direct result, Australian reporting was better equipped than it had been during the time of the tests to understand the full range of implications of many political decisions.

Anderson’s story was the most significant later era piece of investigative science journalism on Maralinga. The story titled “Britain’s dirty deeds at Maralinga” that appeared in the British-based weekly science magazine *New Scientist* on 12 June 1993 went further than ever before in uncovering the truth of the hidden tests, the Vixen B plutonium experiments. The story appears to have been a factor influencing the course of ministerial level talks between Australia and the UK to negotiate a monetary contribution from the UK government to help clean up the Maralinga site. While Maralinga secrets had been revealed incrementally over the years, Anderson was the first to show publicly how much plutonium contamination remained at the site. More than that, Anderson’s story revealed that the true level of contamination had been known by the British authorities but covered up.

“Britain’s dirty deeds at Maralinga” now stands as an important piece of Australian scientific investigative journalism. The story resonated beyond the *New Scientist* readership, becoming a high profile mainstream media story in Australia and adding to the body of Maralinga investigative journalism that finally illuminated Maralinga. Most importantly, it provided conclusive proof that the old way of reporting on the British nuclear tests in Australia was completely gone. Anderson dug into the science and the politics to produce a coherent and comprehensive account of the events at Maralinga and their ramifications, in particular the Vixen B experiments.

The strength of Anderson’s story derives from its central source, John Moroney, who was unnamed in the story itself but acknowledged by Anderson elsewhere. Moroney, former secretary of the Australian Atomic Weapons Test Safety Committee (AWTSC) that operated during the British tests, provided the data that made the *New Scientist* story possible. Moroney’s analysis of about 2,500 pages of declassified nuclear contamination data from the

US/UK Roller Coaster trials in Los Alamos and Nevada (held in 1961 and 1962) revealed that the British atomic test authorities had knowingly left substantial and potentially extremely dangerous amounts of plutonium at or near the surface of parts of the Maralinga test site. Although tests almost identical to Vixen B were held in the US, the British were required to conform to much more rigorous American safety standards and as a result those tests were managed more effectively and more transparent records were kept.

Analysis of the Roller Coaster trials enabled Moroney to convince the Australian government to place pressure on the UK government for compensation. Moroney subsequently briefed Anderson, who then used the information as the basis for his *New Scientist* story. This award-winning piece of journalism uncovered an unpalatable truth:

[Australian radiation scientists] now believe that contamination at Maralinga is much worse than Britain has admitted. They say 21 pits, which were dug to hold radioactive waste, contain far less plutonium than Britain maintains. The remaining plutonium – ten times more than Britain has acknowledged – was spread over the land. The Australians will say that if they had known the full extent of the pollution, they would never have signed the agreement releasing Britain from its responsibilities over the cleanup (Anderson 13)

After a chequered history, Australian journalism had finally got the story out. At the time of the tests themselves, journalists were more used to following the official line on matters of scientific and technological development, and indeed on broader national security issues. They did not recognise the significance of the ongoing tests at Maralinga that left a large area of highly contaminated territory. Generational change saw a shift in skills and in perspective. The journalists of the later generation did a better job of reporting Maralinga, finally placing the momentous events at the desert test site on the public record. This was a long time coming, but without generational change it might not have happened at all.

END NOTES :

- ¹ The 12 major British atomic bomb tests held in Australia were nuclear fission explosions that created large clouds in the shape of a mushroom and produced radioactive fallout over a wide area. These tests exploded a real atomic bomb similar to those that had been dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Other forms of radiological tests associated with the British program did not produce this mushroom shaped cloud, although in many cases they did produce "plumes" of radioactive dust and vapour that emanated from the point of explosion but did not go as high into the atmosphere. The Vixen B tests discussed in this paper were of the latter type.

Former RAAF serviceman Avon Hudson went on to become a vocal advocate for nuclear veterans over decades.

Teletype message from R R Fernandez, acting deputy secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs, to the Minister for Foreign Affairs Andrew Peacock, 14 December 1976

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