

The tell-all book: Oz editor offered to quit, Big Harto gawked at Mrs Garrett

Author : Andrew Crook

Bruce Guthrie's *Man Bites Murdoch* contains a treasure trove of titbits that will have media watchers feverishly scanning the index when it hits bookshops on Wednesday.

The 340-page tome claims that in 2008 the current editor-in-chief of The Australian, Chris Mitchell, offered his resignation to News CEO John Hartigan because Rupert Murdoch's son-in-law, Nationwide News managing director Alasdair Macleod, was cutting too deep at the paper.

Guthrie says Hartigan, during his dismissal conversation in November 2008, claimed that "I can't have a situation at the Herald Sun ... where the managing director and the editor-in-chief are not getting on" as the main reason for his dismissal.

But Guthrie says that rationale was questionable: "Hartigan was on shaky ground here. Months earlier Chris Mitchell had confided to me that he had offered his resignation to Hartigan because he couldn't get on with Rupert's son-in-law ... it was time to reveal I knew this."

The stoush echoed the discord in Victoria, where Guthrie says Macleod's equivalent, Peter Blunden, was waging a secret war against his editorship. A year later, Macleod resigned, suggesting that in that particular battle, the editor won.

Mitchell flatly denied the allegation when contacted by Crikey this morning: "That is not true. I got on very, very well with Alasdair Macleod and still do."

Guthrie also claims a cowboy-boot clad John Hartigan, during Wendy Harmer's 50th birthday celebration on Sydney's northern beaches, was mightily impressed with Peter Garrett's wife Doris' breasts:

"Bizarrely, our bond was built on a pair of cowboy boots Hartigan had bought during a Los Angeles stopover 20 years before ... he had them on at the 50th birthday celebration of our mutual friend, broadcaster and author Wendy Harmer, on Sydney's northern beaches a couple of years back and pointed them out just before he marvelled at the breasts of Peter Garrett's wife, Ingrid [sic]. 'Have you seen the tits on Garrett's missus?' he exclaimed

to Janne [Apelgren, Guthrie's wife] and me. My wife was taken aback; it was the first time she had met Hartigan."

News proprietor Rupert Murdoch also features prominently. In October 2008, just days before he was dismissed by Hartigan, Guthrie says Murdoch questioned Eddie McGuire's fitness to be an opinion columnist in a meeting with then Sunday Herald Sun editor Simon Pristel:

"Then [Murdoch] turned to Pristel's paper, grabbing a fistful of pages. The previous day's edition had featured a story on a teenage Australian singer's sordid fling with British singer-songwriter James Blunt and Murdoch was quick to zero in on it, questioning its place in a family newspaper. As Pristel stammered his defence—essentially that it come down from The Sunday Telegraph in Sydney and he had simply picked it up—Murdoch turned his attention to Eddie McGuire, Pristel's star opinion columnist.

"Is this fellow good enough to be your only opinion page commentator?" asked the proprietor."

Murdoch also comes in for a mention during Guthrie's stint as the Herald and Weekly Times' Los Angeles bureau chief in 1988, when the global supremo was trying to lure him back to Australia to the Herald newspaper, then edited by Crikey publisher Eric Beecher. Guthrie says Murdoch claimed that comedian Mel Brooks had "wasted \$12 million of our money" making the smash hit comedy Spaceballs, which would go on to gross \$US38 million at the box office.

"This latest thing is called Spaceballs or something and it's crap," Murdoch said to Guthrie, seated in the Fox Studios cafeteria in Los Angeles.

Unbeknown to the News overlord, Brooks was sitting at an adjacent table, who "nodded and smiled" from a metre or two away.

But perhaps the biggest tranche of gossip comes when Guthrie relays the parlous situation during his time as editor of The Weekend Australian Magazine in 2004. He describes the human resources nightmare posed when one of The Australian's "key executives" was simultaneously in a relationship with two of his writers: "It was proving distracting, particularly as one of the relationships had produced two children and lasted 20 years. "Some days our office resembled a French farce, as one woman left the building to avoid the other arriving."

Guthrie says one of the woman was later given a redundancy cheque and

was never heard from again.

Even Crikey comes in for a bollocking with Guthrie suggesting media writer Margaret Simons acted as a cipher for News Limited in this March 31 piece in the lead-up to his unfair dismissal case, which revealed the company had been working for months to gather evidence “with a view to destroying [Guthrie’s] reputation”:

“My concern was that News were trying to spook me and that Simons had been used for that purpose. Tony Macken [Guthrie’s lawyer] was convinced it was an attempt to soften us up.”

Simons said she had sought out the information on what was happening at News in preparation for the Guthrie trial and that the information was accurate: “Anybody who thinks I would act as any kind of stooge for News Limited’s corporate interests clearly hasn’t been paying attention to my work.”

The latest revelations will add to the frenzy surrounding the book, after *The Age*—which had exclusive extract rights over the weekend—reported on the existence of a News Limited blacklist featuring Andrew Denton. On Friday, the paper also carried a piece relaying the news that former Victorian governor Richard McGarvie had urged Guthrie not to be “cowed” by Jeff Kennett during his stint as editor of *The Age*.