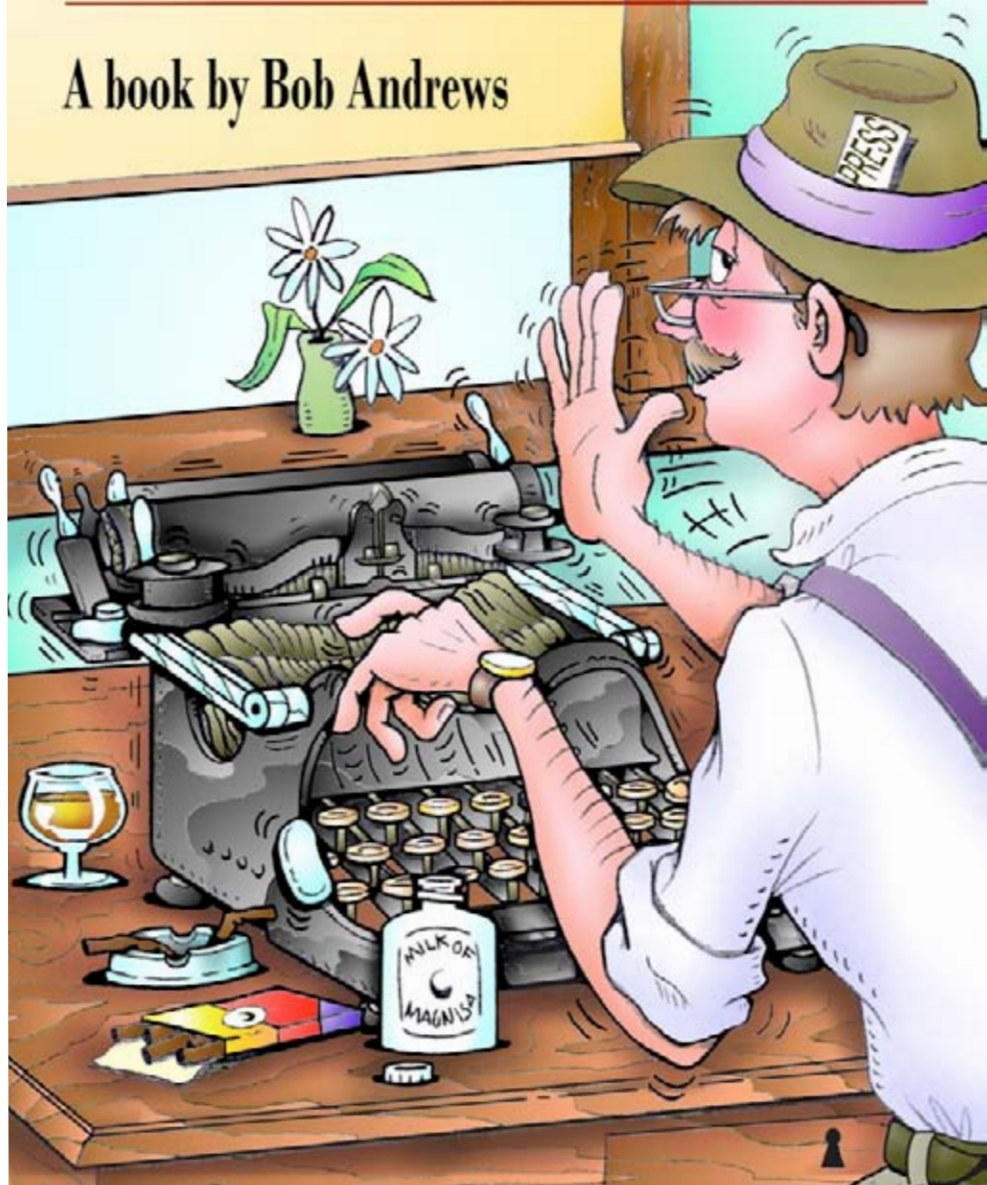


THE FIXER

A book by Bob Andrews



THE FIXER

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Text by Bob Andrews

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AUTHOR INFO

Britain's phone-hacking scandal is nothing new, according to veteran reporter Bob Andrews in his latest book, a memoir that he also describes as a "confession." Andrews—author of *"Boom Boom Baby"* and *"Sticky Rice at the Orchid Café"*—describes in his usual humorous style a controversial career covering more than 50 years of traveling through Europe, North America, Africa and Asia hunting the stories that made the news.

TO BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING...

The rain lashed down in the street outside on a cold September night. The apartment in central Munich was cosily warm and an unusually entertaining film flickered across the TV screen. Carlitos, the family dog snoozed contentedly, a shaggy black and white rug that twitched and snuffled in his own dream world of chasing rabbits. Suddenly, the domestic idyll was broken by the shrill tone of the telephone. My wife put aside her glass of chilled Chablis, rose wearily and answered it.

“It’s London,” she said, with a sigh. She named a famous London popular newspaper and handed me the receiver with disdain, as if it were a dead rat. If she could have held it with two fingers she would have done so.

The call meant only one thing—work. “London” stood for any one of half a dozen newspapers for whom I worked as a freelance contributor in the southern reaches of Germany. From The Sun to the Daily Telegraph, I was the “man on the ground,” the reporter accredited with a German press pass and the reputation of a “man who knows the territory.”

A year or two previously, I had given up a well-paid radio job, regular hours, travel, generous expenses, paid holidays, pension rights and all the other benefits of life in the slow lane. “Are you crazy?” exploded my wife when I told her I was going freelance.

For a few months, as my old pay day passed me by disdainfully, as if I had never existed, I had my doubts. As household bills mounted and my earnings plummeted, I asked myself the same question. Was I indeed crazy? Why had I done it? Why was I now heading off now into

a cold, wet night, leaving the warmth and security of a comfortable home for the uncertainty of an assignment whose outcome I couldn't predict? Why couldn't I feign flu? Why couldn't I just say "No?"

The Germans have a word for an addiction to work that, in their case, helped the country achieve its post-war "Economic Miracle." With that German penchant for portmanteau words, they call it a state of being "Berufsbcschaedigt." The nearest English translation is something like "damaged by one's profession," but I've met few Brits afflicted in that way. If I suffered from the syndrome, I had acquired it very early on in life—perhaps in those early-teenage years when I'd tremble with excitement on hearing the town fire station alarm and then jump on my bike and hurtle after the clanging engines, clutching my father's slouch hat to my head. In the headband was a piece of card on which I'd written "Press."

When the admissions board of a south Somerset grammar school asked me with avuncular concern whether, at the age of 11, I had any idea what profession to choose when the day came when I would be joining Britain's working class, I detected some raised eyebrows at the reply: "A newspaper reporter."

The school had a naval tradition, boasting some illustrious "old boys"—including Nelson's Hardy and the privateer William Dampier, who gave their names to two of the school's dormitories. But not one famous journalist or even a minor writer appeared on the school's scroll of honour, even though the professional and unprofessional qualifications for the job of buccaneer and hack are uncannily similar.

My own qualifications were honed early on by an addiction to the popular papers, which I would surreptitiously read in the local news agent during exeat outings into town. When the Latin master asked us fourth formers if we knew the identity and story of Cassandra, my hand shot in the air and I responded to the horrified classicist's question with one of my own: was he perhaps referring to the Daily Mirror columnist who wrote under that pseudonym?

I persuaded other members of my school house to support my demand for the Daily Mirror to be added to the newspapers stocked by the school library. To his credit, the housemaster agreed to subscribe to the Mirror—but only, as he put it, to give us boys a cautionary glimpse of a depraved world he hoped we would never be tempted to enter.

The headmaster—a forbidding, pipe-smoking figure in shapeless tweeds—was consulted when I applied for permission to leave the school walls on two evenings a week to take shorthand lessons at the nearby home of a kindly old lady who, to judge by some of the silver-framed photographs in her cluttered sitting room, had once been a pretty secretary. To my surprise and his credit, the old boy agreed to grant me a conditional exeat—the condition being to provide him with written proof that I was actually learning something useful and not reinforcing my relationship with the local Carnival Queen, a busty Somerset beauty called Bridget.

The headmaster remained sceptical to the end about my burning ambition to be a newspaper reporter. I was too shy and withdrawn to knock on people's doors in search of "stories," he told me. I was destined for an academic

career, he insisted, not the rough and tumble of journalism.

He was correct up to a point. The transition from a cloistered boarding school existence to the rigours of a weekly newspaper's newsroom was a terrifying step to make, and for the first few months I froze whenever the telephone rang. The school's only telephone had been in the headmaster's study, and such a modern apparatus hadn't yet found a place in my parents' home. Now I was the guardian of the newsroom's phone, responsible not only for answering it but also for taking messages.

I had secured a job with the venerable old *West of England* weekly by secretly writing applications to about a dozen newspapers in the region. Only later did I discover I had made a bad spelling mistake in the all-important letter—giving the word grateful one too many *els*.

Despite the mistake, I was accepted as an apprentice newspaper reporter, indentured for four years on an initial stipend of two pounds and two shillings a week. Although these were the days of penny buns and ninepenny cinema seats, my weekly pay packet—literally a brown envelope handed out by the editor's secretary—scarcely covered the rent of my “digs,” the spare bedroom of a widow's terraced house on the outskirts of town.

My parents chipped in, but the lifestyle I adopted after years of a monastic boarding school existence cried out for a serious injection of extra funds. It was then that I was introduced to the shadowy world of freelancing. By moonlighting for regional papers at weekends I could double my newspaper pay—the penny-a-line income from covering a Saturday afternoon football match paid my bill that evening in the cider pubs of South Somerset.

As my four years of apprenticeship drew to a close, I

scanned the vacancies columns of The Press Gazette, looking for an escape from a weekly round of funerals and flower shows. Half a dozen lines half hidden in severe columns of print opened up an exotic vista of tantalizing promise: “Daily newspaper in Northern Rhodesia seeks young, unattached, energetic reporter.”

JAMBO AFRICA...

Northern Rhodesia. The name evoked a world of Rider Haggard and Alan Quatermain, Livingstone, Stanley, Zulus, pygmies, impenetrable jungle, man-eating lions—adventure. There it was in the office atlas, a wedge of British Empire pink in the centre of Africa. Six thousand miles south of Somerset, hundreds of times further than any journey I'd yet made in the wilds of the West Country.

Off went the application; back came an invitation to an interview at the newspaper's London office. I knew I had the job when the London editor, a tanned colonial type with a neatly trimmed moustache and military bearing, thanked me for completing the interview "without once lecturing me on the evils of colonialism."

Colonialism? What was that exactly? My ignorance played for once in my favour and I got the job.

Shortly after, I closed the notebook on my last weekly newspaper assignment, tapped out my final report, careful as always to spell correctly the winners of the various categories in the Hazlebury Plucknett flower show, and handed my ancient Underwood upright over to my successor. One week later, I was covering a murder case in the High Court of the British colony of Northern Rhodesia.

In those days, it took 24 hours to fly from London's Heathrow airport to Central Africa, in a Vickers Viscount turbo-jet of Central African Airways. Africa opened up its secrets slowly to the traveler from Europe. The interior of the Dark Continent was accessible only after five refueling stops, each of which was a magical milestone on a journey into the unknown. We said farewell to Europe at Rome's Fiumecino airport, following the fairy lights of the

Tyrrhenian coast southwards out over the Mediterranean and entering Africa over the dunes of Libya.

Next to me on the aircraft was another Argus neophyte, bound for Southern Rhodesia and the Bulawayo Chronicle. We agreed to sample the local beer at each of the African stops on the journey south, downing the first of them in Benghazi's shabby airport, where supper was served. The Viscount aircraft's galley only provided a small selection of drinks and boiled sweets to suck before landing, handed around by one solitary stewardess.

Wadi Haifa in the vast North African desert was reached in the middle of a star-filled night in which a cool pre-dawn mist covered the tarmac like a shroud and shook us drowsy passengers awake. Next stop: Khartoum, where blue-black Nubian waiters draped in white robes served us a passable breakfast in an empty airport dining room, beneath slowly rotating ceiling fans.

Before take-off, uniformed health workers came aboard and sprayed the interior from old-fashioned, pump-operated dispensers. Tsetse fly precautions, the stewardess told us. Tsetse flies transmit the virus that causes sleeping sickness—the scourge of early Africa explorers. Africa, at last! I inhaled that DDT as if it were incense.

Dawn broke over the scrubland of southern Sudan as the Viscount droned on south towards its final refueling stop—Entebbe, on Lake Victoria. Lunch, served in the airport restaurant, was a hearty introduction to the kind of fare served throughout Britain's colonial possessions in Africa: brown Windsor soup, a roast of some kind and watery vegetables, with steamed suet pudding to finish off the repast. But the local beer was good—and remained very drinkable wherever it was served in Central Africa.