

Graham Dennis, publisher of Nova Scotia's newspaper

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When Graham Dennis took over as publisher of The Chronicle Herald and The Mail Star, the type was hot, the war with the Soviets was cold, reporters were "ink-stained wretches," and writers of letters to the editor signed off their fiery missives with pseudonyms.

The year was 1954. The New York Giants were World Series champions. Louis St. Laurent was prime minister. Dwight Eisenhower was president. Queen Elizabeth was two years into her reign. Conrad Black, future media baron, was still wearing short pants. Graham Dennis, destined to serve as this newspaper's publisher for the next 57 years, was 26 years old.

Mr. Dennis, who died on Thursday, outlasted all of the above in one way or another — except the Queen, which would be just fine with him. Yes, Mr. Black is still around, but he's been to prison and he can't be described as a media mogul anymore.

I mention dear Conrad because he in many ways stands for the typical newspaper proprietor of his era. Black is like the Murdochs and the Maxwells of the world — brash, flamboyant, vain, complicated, and determined to build an empire.

Graham Dennis was cut from different cloth. He was modest, self-effacing, shy, polite to the point of courtliness, and focused on the single goal of running one smallish daily newspaper whose mission was to support progress in the place he loved — Nova Scotia.

Conrad Black was also like many of his Canadian contemporaries in another way — he was determined to buy The Chronicle Herald newspapers from Mr. Dennis. In fact, quite a crowd of media bosses has tried to unseat the Dennis family.

When I was The Chronicle Herald's Ottawa correspondent, in the early 1980s, the guys who worked for the Thomson newspaper chain often bugged me about whether "Graham" might sell. The Thomson newspaper chain is no longer with us; the Dennis family still owns the Halifax newspapers.

In 1999, I was at a dinner in Toronto at which Peter White, an adviser to Conrad Black, pointedly sat beside me. I was vain enough to imagine that White wanted to experience the light elegance of my refined company. Within five minutes, his real mission was clear. He wanted to know if Mr. Dennis would speak to Conrad about selling the paper.

But just like Maggie Thatcher was not in politics "for the turning," Graham Dennis was not in publishing for the selling.

Instead, he was determined to play his part as a "humble pedlar of newspapers." This was no mere stock expression. Graham told me a few years ago that he spent his first 20 years as

publisher working to keep the dignified old lady of Argyle Street on its feet financially. You always had to sell copies of the old broadsheet to stay in business. Still do.

Mr. Dennis ran a private company, and every instinct in his body told him to run it privately. But over the years, I had a few conversations with Mr. Dennis in which he hinted at the immense business challenges the newspaper faced.

He always navigated his newspapers through crises, even as bigger independent papers yielded to chain ownership, and small Nova Scotia competitors like The Daily News and The Fourth Estate came and went.

In the end, the secret of his success was not an MBA-style focus on the bottom line; he knew in his bones that the Herald's distinction in the market was producing good journalism that reported what someone has called "history on the run."

To accomplish this, he kept bureaus open (five in the province and one in Ottawa) that most publishers would have shut down decades ago. He beefed up coverage when he could, sending reporters across the nation and around the globe to cover important political or business stories.

Graham's daughter Sarah Dennis, who now runs the newspaper, decided this fall to hire a handful of new reporters to improve business coverage. In short, the tradition continues — a fact that must have given Mr. Dennis satisfaction in his final months on this side of heaven.

In the end, Graham Dennis died as he had lived for the past 57 years, as the publisher of a newspaper which his family owned, but which he believed belonged to all of Nova Scotia.

Source: Herald Opinions <http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/39091-graham-dennis-publisher-nova-scotia%E2%80%99s-newspaper>