



George Bell

In 1863, in the goldrush years, when Julius (later Sir Julius) Vogel was 28 and part way through his short, flamboyant editorship of the *Otago Daily Times* he hired George Bell – then 54 and seemingly close to retirement – for the editorial staff.

Born in Kingston-upon-Hull in England on 9 January 1809, Bell was a Yorkshireman by birth and upbringing. He started off in commerce, and was strongly committed to the Reform politics of Bright and Cobden. On emigrating to Victoria in 1852, he was appointed Hansard reporter in the state parliament.

After crossing the Tasman with his wife, son and six daughters in 1863 he became sub-editor of the *Times* and editor of the associated *Otago Witness*. When Vogel was sacked in 1868 and Dunedin's newspapers entered a hectic period of competition and takeover, Bell surprisingly went out on his own at the age of 60.

He founded the small *Evening Independent* in January 1869, then two months later bought the larger *Evening Star*, running it as proprietor and editor for a quarter of a century.

With top-class working conditions and excellent relations, he gathered around him a talented staff. Emphasising local news coverage and independent political comment, he won for the newspaper a growing circulation and, in due course, a national reputation.

Bell had no political aspirations himself, and his life away from newspapers was devoted to church, lodge and a talent with the violin.

Abigail, his wife of 56 years died in 1892, and so, on 1 January 1895, he handed over editorship of the *Star* to Mark Cohen and vested financial control in his family. He died in Dunedin on 4 February 1899, and is buried alongside his wife, in Dunedin's northern cemetery and a beautiful marble monument graces the plot.

Of the many shareholding descendants who worked on the paper during the 20th century, the gregarious John Bell was, in his day, one of Dunedin's most amusing pranksters, while Max Smith was decorated for gallantry and special services to the Greek royal family in World War 2.

In 1979 the Evening Star merged with the Otago Daily Times, and the Smith family (descended from George Bell's fourth daughter, Hannah) achieved dynastic control of Allied Press Ltd newspapers.

So the wheel of ownership, beginning with George Bell in 1869, turned full circle in 1986, when Mr Julian Smith, Bell's great-great-grandson achieved a management buy-out creating Allied Press Ltd and privatising the business. He became principle shareholder, chairman of directors and managing director and his brother, Nick a substantial shareholder, director and business manager.