

Bert Lillye



Photo courtesy of Fairfax

Introduction

The problem with racing writers is that no-one writes about them? Bert Lillye was one of the best. Many would claim he was the best. I knew him well. He was a great friend of the Upper Hunter in general and Scone Race Club in particular. He was a great mate of mine. I'm proud to have known him. He was the pick of a great bunch. I wrote about him on my 'blog' as follows.



The featured image shows Mr. Bert Lillye, turf writer for the Sydney Morning Herald, presenting Mr. J. W. 'Bim' Thompson of Widden Stud with the owner's trophy, who accepted on behalf of himself and co-owners Messrs F. L. Bragg, W. Parry-Okeden, F. Wilson, F. Thomas and R. Mann after their horse 'Idol' won the Bert Lillye Lightning Stakes Wednesday 16th May 1979

Bert Lillye was a permanent fixture at Scone Cup Race Meetings throughout the era of the 1960s to the 1980s. Bim Thompson was one of the people he most admired in the thoroughbred industry.

"Hot Off the Press"! (Wednesday 21st November 2018)

I'm absolutely thrilled and delighted that my late great friend Bert Lillye has been inducted into the Australian Media Hall of Fame! Please see below and click on the link.

Hi Bill, I hope you are well! Apologies for the delay, but here is the profile of Bert Lillye that is now up on our website. Thank you greatly for all your help with photos, and please get in touch if you spot any issues with the captioning.

<https://halloffame.melbournepressclub.com/article/bert-lillye>

All the best,

Wednesday May 16, 1979

The late Bert Lillye was **the** racing journalist par excellence. If the pen is indeed mightier than the sword then Bert's construct was exquisitely honed pure rapier steel with an incisive pointy tip. Even his peers acknowledged his craft. Among these legendary luminaries are figured Jack Ward, Bill Casey, Keith Robbins, Max Presnell, Bill Whittaker, John Holloway and even Les Carlyon. Racing writers were employed to keep punters informed. The furious advancement of new age technology has caused a withering on the vine of media's changing face. Few are left. On retirement Bert said:

"My greatest disappointment is that the wonderful characters are fast disappearing from the racecourse, the victims of progress. The characters have gone even faster than the racing writers."

Bert Lillye was the best friend the Scone Race Club ever had. He retained a lifelong passion for Scone and district. The Scone Cup in May each year was his most favoured destination exceeding even that of the Melbourne Cup. He brought an entourage with him. Being a most gregarious person he appreciated more than anything the abundant hospitality lavishly bestowed. Famous watering holes included 'Trevors Stud' in Phillip Street, Scone. This was the home of Archie and Betty Shepherd. Rum and milk was the 'heart starter' every day at 6:00am. On one famous or perhaps infamous occasion Bert and I overdid it. We were expected on Radio Station 2NM at Muswellbrook to talk about the Scone Cup. We lingered rather too long at 'Trevors Stud' and were running late. The anchor journalist Mike Pritchard (now ABC) was distraught! He'd run out of content and advertisements with almost 40 minutes to fill. No worries! He couldn't shut us up when time expired. We talked through the 10 minute news break as well. Both outward and return journeys would have been criminal today. This was before RBT. On reflection perhaps we were culpable anyway? I was the guilty driver.

Bert Lillye was the ultimate 'wordsmith' challenged only by Carlyon but exceeding him in passion. He was a perfectionist who did not cut corners. His research was profound; his 'nose' for a story piquant. In pursuit of a good yarn Bert was absolutely determined and stoically single minded. Bert was inducted into the Australian Racing Hall of Fame in Brisbane in May 2015 which is the industry's leading accolade. It was the 15th occasion the Racing Hall of Fame honoured the luminaries of the turf; both equine and human. Chairman of the Hall of Fame selection panel Bob Charley said the event was an opportunity to recognise the people and the horses that make racing the "unique sport it is". Lillye joins previously elected journalists A.B. "Banjo" Paterson, Bert Wolfe and another former Sydney Morning Herald racing editor Bill Whittaker. His presence there is richly deserved.

One of Australia's foremost racing journalists Bert Lillye was involved with the industry for almost 50 years. Lillye began work at 15 as a copy boy at 'Smith's Weekly' in 1934. From there he progressed to the Sydney Morning Herald, moved to the Daily Mirror for five years, and then returned to the Herald where he remained until his retirement in 1984. He also contributed extensively to Turf Monthly, where he commenced writing his column 'Backstage of Racing'; a feature he later continued in the Sydney Morning Herald. Lillye was an expert researcher, ever careful to verify his findings before committing them to print. Wherever possible he would look at the human angle, and show sympathy for the 'battlers' of racing. He was known as a great raconteur. Many of his stories he brought together in his collection of anecdotes 'Backstage of Racing'. I'm the very proud owner of a signed copy.

See also:

Legendary turf journalist Bert Lillye joins greats in racing's Hall of Fame

John Holloway May 21, 2015

<http://www.smh.com.au/sport/horseracing/legendary-turf-journalist-bert-lillye-joins-greats-in-racings-hall-of-fame-20150521-gh6j1e.html>

Racing Victoria Associates

Bert Lillye (1919 – 1996)

<https://rv.racing.com/careers-and-education/australian-racing-museum/hall-of-fame/associates/bert-lillye>

Racing's Literary Legends



I was going to name this 'Litany of Literary Legends'. I liked the alliteration; but I'm not sure the protagonists would have agreed? I think it adds further cachet to my own tribute to Bert Lillye.

The featured image shows Bill Casey, Keith Robbins, Bert Lillye, Jack Ward and Max Presnell with Hall of Fame trainer Bart Cummings. Was this the apogee of racing journalism in Sydney? I could add John Holloway and Alan Speers. Photographer Ron Bickley was ever present. Les Carlyon in Melbourne would certainly have made the list.

When researching and writing about Bert Lillye earlier the thought crossed my mind we are losing the old school journalists who once proliferated; and even dominated? I knew many of them albeit some of them not so well. I regret their gradual demise. I dedicate this 'blog' to them in fond remembrance. They are not being replaced. As usual I've plundered, plagiarized and purloined to suit my purpose. Why reinvent 'paper wheels'? It's all been done before. My memoir tutor said: ***'Read a lot and write what you read'***. I like that. I've discovered writing memoir is about three things: compilation, composition and collation. I cheat a little; and sometimes a lot. Block happens. I dutifully acknowledge all sources. It's like quoting scientific literature; where perhaps I'm more adroit.

See also: <https://www.smh.com.au/sport/racing/the-ink-is-still-in-my-veins-after-more-than-60-years-20181202-p50jrb.html>

The following pen pictures are taken from the vignettes flowing from the pen of some of those cited.

Father of the press box wrote from the heart

December 30, 2012

<http://www.smh.com.au/sport/horseracing/father-of-the-press-box-wrote-from-the-heart-20121229-2c0a9.html>

Worldwide, racing writers, epitomised by Bert Lillye, are withering on the vine of the media's changing face.

Even in the US most major publications had more than one scribe specialising in the horse sports but few are left.

In Australia, where the turf has been more of the national psyche than a sport, mammoth staffs were employed to keep punters informed.

Being a racing writer differs from being a journalist who can write racing. Most can and might even do it better than the "expert" who produces stories and comments, tips and other menial tasks.

"The *Sydney Morning Herald* staff of the 1950s and 1960s had many proficient writers with Lillye the star performer," Neville Prendergast wrote in *From Press Box and Stable*.

"George Miller, Roy Abbott and Bill Whittaker, bloodstock expert Charles McQuillan, Sam Finlayson and Ray Kelly were also employed.

"Whittaker was one of the more astute judges and could interpret intelligently. The *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a lot of statistical stories [sweet words for compiling the official starting price] and relied heavily on accurate details men like Reg Eades, Ted Wells and Cec Poachey."

With Craig Young taking redundancy this year, Fairfax Media in Sydney has one full-time racing writer, Chris Roots, and a geriatric contributor.

Before becoming a racehorse trainer Prendergast was a contender for one of the best racing writers. Who is on top of the list in my time?

Employing guide lines of being full-time and producing over a long period are major attributes. Of course, styles have changed with some great reporters and other fine writers. But Lillye gets my vote.

"As for wordsmiths the great Bert Lillye of the 50s and 60s would be just about cancelled out by Les Carlyon of the 90s," Prendergast opined. "Perhaps Carlyon was a shade cleverer with phraseology but Lillye might just about have an edge in passion."

Carlyon writes with excellence from subjects ranging from Bart Cummings to Gallipoli but Lillye for over a half century churned out hundreds of thousands of quality words on racing. Nobody wrote more because not only did he appear in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Sun-Herald* and *Daily Mirror* in Sydney but also *Turf Monthly* before he died on February 18, 1996.

On his demise, Arnold Rodgers eulogised: "I followed Bert's advice and purchased the title *Turf Monthly* and restarted the magazine. From the day I took over 44 years ago Bert advised me. For many years he continued to put together each month's edition of *Turf Monthly*."

"Being a perfectionist he would not cut corners. Everything had to be spot on. It was for *Turf Monthly* that he began writing *Backstage Of Racing*, a feature he carried on for Fairfax."

Backstage Of Racing was also the title of a book of his columns published by John Fairfax Marketing. Lillye, too, was also the subject of a *This Is Your Life* on television which emphasised his passion for the punt and racing in general.

During World War II he went AWOL, travelling from Queensland to Sydney to see Modulation win the 1944 Epsom. Subsequent fines and confinement to barracks, he figured, were reasonable prices to pay to see a major race live. In pursuit of a good yarn Lillye was ever determined.

"How can I forget the disastrous floods of the 1960s that put most of the Richmond district under water?" he wrote in his final column.

"Dozens of valuable racehorses were lost. Boats were only available to civil rescue authorities. But Jim Walsh, publican and committeeman of the Hawkesbury Racing Club, came to the rescue. He rounded up a small boat for me and the photographer to search for horses.

We obtained scoop photographs when we found Martello Towers [an AJC Derby winner] covered in mud but alive ..."

What Lillye didn't disclose is that he approached the *SMH* sports editor, Doug Gardiner, to ask for an office car – because he didn't drive – to pursue the story and was knocked back. Thus he called upon photographer Ron Bickley, who rode shotgun with him on most of his country ventures for *Turf Monthly*, and they came up with the goods.

"I genuinely believe Bernborough was the best racehorse I've seen," Lillye maintained. "What he did under enormous weights as a six-year-old stallion made him a freak ..."

"Bill Cook was my favourite jockey but Ron Quinton would be a champion in any era. As for trainers, how can anyone go past Thomas John Smith, MBE, who set a record that will never be equalled and one of greatest success stories of our time and that's not restricted to racing".



'Bernborough' returning to scale after winning Tatts Chelmsford Stakes @ Randwick in 1946

Athol Mulley is in the saddle and Harry Plant was the trainer



Ron Quinton & Theo Green

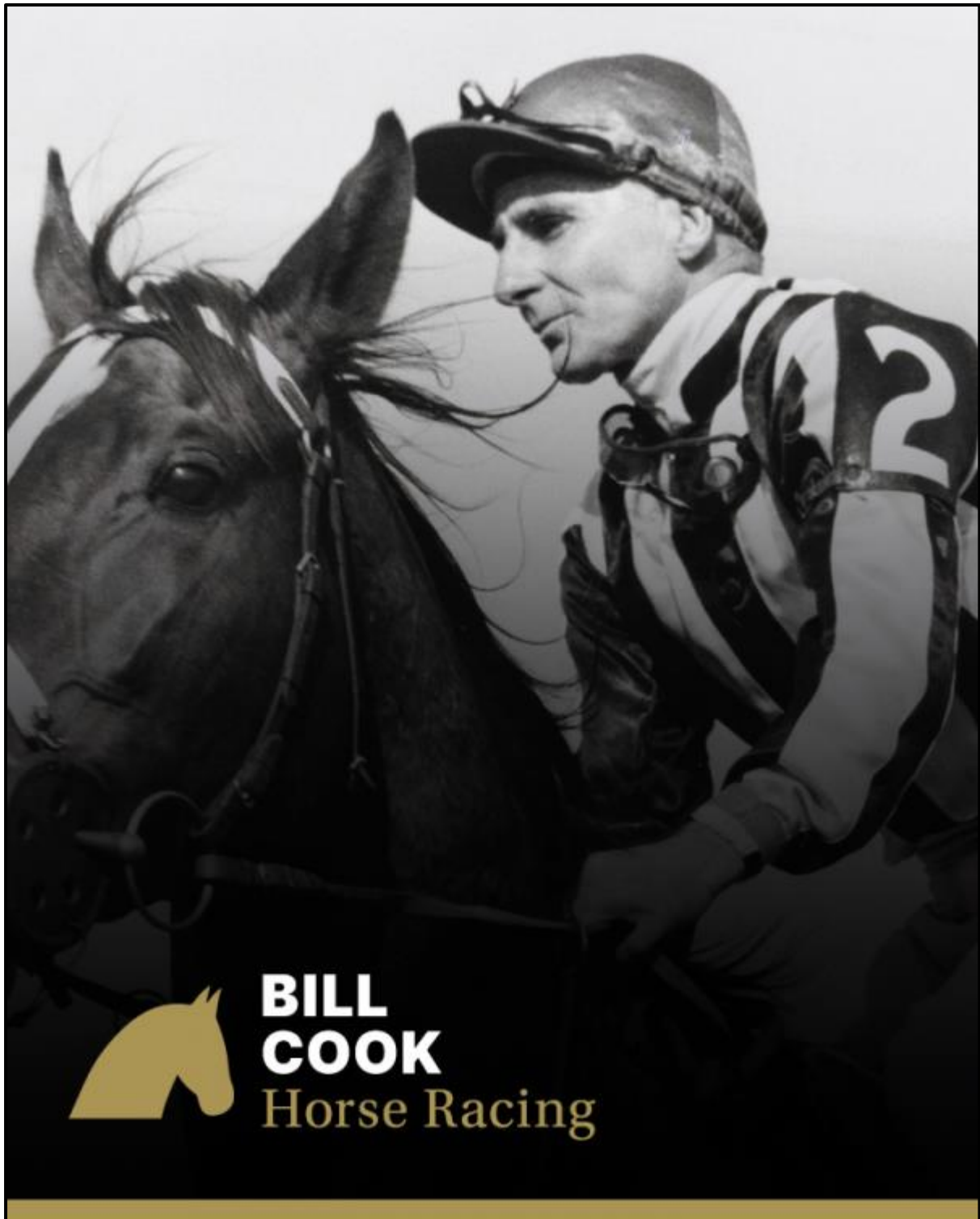


Photo courtesy of Australian Racing Hall of Fame



Bert Lillye and T J Smith MBE

Photo courtesy of Fairfax

After leaving Fairfax, Lillye contributed even more to racing as a member of the Kembla Grange committee. "My greatest disappointment is that the wonderful characters are fast disappearing from the racecourse, the victims of progress," he said.

The characters have gone even faster than the racing writers.

No doubt latter generations are as good, and probably more versatile as those who look down from the walls of the old Randwick press box, which is going, too.

Young now drives a bus for school children on the central coast with aplomb and patience which none of us, Lillye in particular, could have done.

Legendary turf journalist Bert Lillye joins greats in racing's Hall of Fame

John Holloway May 21, 2015

<http://www.smh.com.au/sport/horseracing/legendary-turf-journalist-bert-lillye-joins-greats-in-racings-hall-of-fame-20150521-gh6j1e.html>

Former Sydney Morning Herald turf editor Bert Lillye was inducted into the Australian Racing Hall of Fame in Brisbane on Thursday night. It is fitting Lillye be included among Australia's racing luminaries, which is the industry's leading accolade. It was the 15th occasion the Racing Hall of Fame honoured the heroes of the turf, equine and human.

Lillye was joined as an associate inductee by Eduardo Cojuangco, while jockeys Glen Boss and Robert Thompson also entered the Hall of Fame, while George Moore was lifted to legend status.

Danehill, Choisir, Dalray and Briseis were the horses added to the Hall of Fame, while Phar Lap's trainer Harry Telford was joined by Brian Mayfield-Smith and Jim Moloney in the trainers' category.

Chairman of the Hall of Fame selection panel Bob Charley said the event was an opportunity to recognise the people and the horses that make racing the "unique sport it is". Lillye joins previously elected journalists A.B. "Banjo" Paterson, Bert Wolfe and another former Herald racing editor, Bill Whittaker, and his presence there is richly deserved.



Bill Whittaker is on the right with notebook in hand.

Racing Journalism's Halcyon Days

Featured Image: courtesy of **Ray Alexander**

Ray writes (23/06/2020): *"I am including a photo which **Bill Whittaker's** son Mark (another journalist and author) placed on Facebook. He identified Bill and me, but did not know who the other two were. I was able to inform him that they were **Barry Parkes** (ex-Mirror, Truth and Telegraph) and **Frank McGrath**, who trained On Line to win a Sydney Cup for John Wren and whose father trained dual Melbourne Cup winner and one of the all-time greats, Peter Pan".*

John Holloway continues. I met Lillye while a copy boy at Fairfax's Ultimo offices, which printed the Sydney Morning Herald, The Sun and The Sun-Herald.

Being a "mad" racing follower, I was fortunate enough to have been befriended by Lillye, along with all the other famous racing writers employed by the Fairfax group.

Lillye, however, was the man who made me want to succeed in the profession and he took me under his wing in more ways than one. Yes, to be a successful racing writer, you had to be a good drinker and that was one thing he succeeded in teaching me.

He was the most prolific wordsmith I ever encountered and was very much a gambler at heart, from the war years when Bernborough was the best horse he had seen. Bert also rated Rising Fast, Dalray, Peter Pan and Tulloch each deserving their own pedestals.

Bert's love of horses saw him heavily involved in the catastrophic floods in the Windsor district, a renowned spelling district for racehorses, in the 1960s.

He approached the then SMH sports editor to supply him with a car and photographer to go to Windsor and get pictures and information for the paper but his request was denied. Lillye never had a driver's license and got in touch with his great friend and racing photographer Ron Bickley and they made their way to Windsor with local publican Jim Walsh arranging for a boat and a skipper to search the area.

What they achieved was somewhat remarkable with one of Australia's favourite racehorses Martello Towers, the winner of the 1959 three-year-old triple-crown, up to his shins in water covered in mud.

The grey galloper was washed five miles downriver from where he had been spelling but thanks to the efforts of his photographer, Lillye was able to save Martello Towers and the photo's where spread all over the front page.



Martello Towers

Photo courtesy of 'Kings of the Turf' by Ian Ibbett

Bert was instrumental for my close involvement in breeding and was responsible for my first trip to Scone, which he painted to me over many a cold ale as one of the great parts of the thoroughbred industry.



Betty Shepherd exercises the Bletchingly/Breadline weanling colt at 'Trevors' paddock in Phillip Street, Scone. Archie Shepherd, Sarah Howey, Bert Lillye (leaning on fence) and Bruce Shepherd are in the background. My baby daughter Kirsty is in the stroller! It was May 1978 and the colt was sold for \$4,250:00 at the (now defunct) Scone Weanling Sale. He was a full brother to 'Bakerman' which Bert purchased from me for \$3,600:00 the year before. This colt raced successfully as 'Nioka Prince' and later stood as a stallion at Jack Johnston's Tyrone Stud. Herald photographer Alan Purcell took the iconic photograph along with many others. I ran into Alan at the SCG some years later at a Sheffield Shield match. He said he barely survived the bibulous trip!

It was from this hospitality base at 'Trevors' that Bert and I set out for Radio Station 2NM in Muswellbrook to talk about the Scone Cup on Mike Pritchard's Saturday morning sports program. We were both well primed on Archie Shepherd's potent brew of 'Rum & Milk'! I was driving! We arrived late in race-record time; and finished later! Mike had to push the news segment back by 10 minutes because he couldn't shut us up! We talked non-stop for fully 40 minutes!

I think Bert enjoyed these relaxed bush forays more than anything else? They were his kind of people and responded accordingly. He was not a 'pomp-and-circumstances' type of man?

Lillye also had a great fondness for Phar Lap and was intrigued how a wreath would appear at Randwick racetrack for two decades by an anonymous person who he later tracked down as Noel Hickey. The headstone from Phar Lap's grave in America was presented to the Australian Jockey Club and placed inside the track where it remains today and Hickey continued to place the wreath each year commemorating his passing in April 1932. Again it was another front page story for the doyen of racing journalists.

He also appeared on a This Is Your Life TV episode with Roger Climpson and spent many years on the administration side of the Kembla Grange Club with Keith Nolan and their efforts saved the club from extinction.

Lillye had several columns in the Herald – the Backstage of Racing with a book being released in 1985 after his retirement – along with Bloodlines, which is the name of this column I inherited 15 years ago.

Lillye passed away on February 18, 1996 and had a career in racing journalism that had spanned 50 years. There will never be another Bert Lillye.

Johnhollysenior@yahoo.com.au

RACING VICTORIA ASSOCIATES

Bert Lillye (1919 – 1996)

<https://rv.racing.com/careers-and-education/australian-racing-museum/hall-of-fame/associates/bert-lillye>

“He lived life to the full, and through his pen was able to give countless other people a lot of happiness”. (Keith Robbins)

One of Australia’s foremost racing journalists, Bert Lillye was involved with the industry for almost 50 years.

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He was known as a great raconteur, and many of his stories he brought together in his collection of anecdotes Backstage of Racing.

Father of the press box wrote from the heart

December 30, 2012

<http://www.smh.com.au/sport/horseracing/father-of-the-press-box-wrote-from-the-heart-20121229-2c0a9.html>



Keith Robbins, Alan Speers, Ron Bickley and Bert Lillye

Acknowledge: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lillye-albert-john-bert-27101>

Australian Dictionary of Biography

Lillye, Albert John (Bert) (1919–1996) by Wayne Peake. Article first published online in 2020

Albert John Lillye (1919–1996), sports journalist and racing administrator, was born on 9 July 1919 at Paddington, Sydney, only child of New South Wales-born Cecil Florence Myrtle Lockhart, née Smith, and Tasmanian-born Albert Lillye, wharf labourer. Bert recalled living opposite the Rosebery Park pony racecourse and watching races from the roof of his home. He was educated at Chatswood Public and Chatswood Boys' Intermediate High schools. Aged fourteen, he left home and became a copy-boy on *Smith's Weekly*, the *Referee*, and the *Arrow*—the latter two papers largely devoted to horseracing.

At the Presbyterian Manse, Hurstville, on 3 July 1941 Lillye married Amelia Bernice 'Bonnie' Kendrigan, a printer. On 1 October 1941 he began full-time duty in the Citizen Military Forces for service in World War II. He was employed as a cook in support units in New South Wales and Queensland. When stationed near Toowoomba he watched the promising colt Bernborough on the track. In 1942 he had twice briefly absented himself without leave to attend race meetings.

In September 1945, having been refused a posting to be near his sick wife, he absconded for forty days and was court martialled on return. Discharged in November, he returned to *Smith's Weekly*. He then worked at the *Sydney Morning Herald* for thirteen years before being lured to the *Daily Mirror* for five years. In 1969 he returned to the *Herald* and was racing editor until he retired in July 1984.

A prolific and versatile racing writer with a Runyonesque touch, Lillye obtained tip-offs in bars and stables and produced topical copy for the dailies and well-researched columns for the Sunday papers. In addition he wrote countless uncredited features for *Turf Monthly* and *Racetrack* magazines. He delighted in documenting the behind-the-scenes world of racing, including his visits to stud farms, and bemoaned the passing of the racetrack characters who abounded before the Totaliser Administration Board era of regulation.

In November 1961 Lillye learnt that the champion racehorse Martello Towers and several others were lost, feared drowned, in the flooded Nepean River. He recruited a photographer-driver and headed for Windsor. They tracked down Martello Towers and several other missing horses, and were instrumental in their rescue, which he reported in *Turf Monthly*. In 1973 the Australian Jockey Club, acting on his suggestion, set up an exhibition at Randwick racecourse. At about the same time he began recording the history and folklore of both pony and AJC-registered racing in his 'Backstage of Racing' column in the *Sun-Herald*. A selection would be republished in book form in 1985.

Lillye was tall and broad-shouldered, with an unabashed Australian accent. In later life he wore thick framed glasses. He was jovial and avuncular and mentored many fledgling racing journalists, including Steve Crawley and John Holloway. Introducing them to trainers, jockeys, and administrators, he also tutored them in the bonhomie of drinking which he considered part of the craft of racing journalism. He formed close friendships with his mates from the track and participated in social cricket matches between jockeys and journalists. An ardent gambler, he was noted for charging through betting rings to place bets. For his articles he was twice awarded (1979, 1983) the Sydney Turf Club's Golden Slipper writers' prize.

Since 1976 Lillye had taken an active interest in the Kembla Grange racecourse, near his Woonona home. After its controlling club was placed in receivership, he and the sports administrator Keith Nolan formed the Illawarra Turf Club and lobbied for government support, helping to secure the long-term future of the site. He became vice-president of the ITC and a trustee of the Kembla Grange recreation reserve. In the early 1980s his story featured on the television program *This Is Your Life*, and his portrait by Craig Taylor was commissioned by John Fairfax Ltd. Survived by his wife and their son and two daughters, Lillye died on 18 February 1996 in the Illawarra Regional Hospital, Wollongong, and was cremated. He had attended Kembla Grange races the previous afternoon. At the course, a lounge in the grandstand and an annual race was named after him. He was inducted into the Australian Racing (2015) and Australian Media (2018) halls of fame.

Research edited by Nicole McLennan

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Additional Resources

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- [development of harness racing at Harold Park](#), Recorder (Port Pirie, SA), 9 January 1952, p 1
- [edits the Australian Racehorse Trainers' journal](#), Newcastle Morning Herald (NSW), 15 January 1954, p 12
- [interviewed on the best Melbourne Cup](#), Canberra Times, 3 November 1985, p 77
- [visits the Canberra track](#), Canberra Times, 26 August 1987, p 36

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Photo courtesy of the Scone Advocate, May 1979

Here Bert is presenting the winning jockey's trophy to Kim Smith, the rider of 'Idol'; winner of the Bert Lillye Lightning Handicap at the Scone Cup Meeting Wednesday May 16th 1979. Peter Meehan (Radio Station 2NM) is assisting. Trainer Steve Englebrecht is in the background with Idol's co-owner Mr F L Bragg of 'Rossgole', Aberdeen.



The youngest jockey to ride a Golden Slipper winner; WAYNE HARRIS on 1979 victor CENTURY MISS

Harris was 18 (& 111 days) when he partnered with the Bart Cummings-trained filly in a barnstorming victory.

Bert Lillye was largely instrumental in persuading Bart Cummings to select Wayne Harris as the rider for Century Miss in the Golden Slipper 1979. Bert was a fixture at Scone Cup Meetings of this era and had closely followed the careers of both trainer Pat Farrell and apprentice Wayne Harris. Wayne had announced himself to the racing world not long before by riding five (5) winners at a meeting at Scone.



The featured image shows the assembly for the presentation of the Bim Thompson Lightning Handicap at White Park Race Course Scone in May 1981. Those present from left to right are: David Bath; Bill Howey; Robert Thompson (winning jockey); AO Ellison; Antony Thompson; Peter Meehan (Radio Station 2NM); Bert Lilley (Sydney Morning Herald).



The featured image shows the assemblage for the presentation of the Bim Thompson Lightning Handicap at White Park Race Course Scone in May 1981. Those present from left to right are: Cliff Ellis; Roy Hinton (Trainer); Bill Rose; David Bath; Antony Thompson; Bill Howey; AO Ellison; Peter Meehan (Radio Station 2NM); Bert Lilley (Sydney Morning Herald).