

In the *Guardian* the other week, Robert Maxwell summarised some of his recent achievements for the benefit of Hugo Young. Cap'n Bob, reported Young, unsuccessfully concealing his horror behind tongue-in-cheek irony, "has saved the Daily Mirror, saved the Labour Party and indispensably contributed to saving Eastern Europe. From his palatial penthouse in Maxwell House, London, he can look backwards and forwards to vindication in a scale granted to few men in the autumn of their days".

Mr Young is an exceedingly smart chap, but he lives a sheltered life. He has clearly never before encountered a case in which vast wealth, corporate power and runaway egocentricity combine to detach an individual from the constraints which bear down on lesser mortals. He expects, for example, that people should provide evidence for their assertions, and requires that arguments should have logical structures. Little does he realise that such expectations are valid only for *Untermenchen* like himself.

At one point in the interview, Mr Maxwell claimed that his newspapers had played a significant role in the "defeat" of the miners' strike and the "brilliant victory over government" recently scored by the ambulance workers. He then went on to explain his role in sorting out the Labour party. "I take great delight and some pride", he boomed, "in having got rid of the militants out of the Labour movement".

There was a good deal more in this vein, including some contradictory assertions by the *Mirror's* proprietor on the editorial freedom granted to his hacks. At one point he claimed that they enjoyed "considerably more freedom than they ever did under Hugh Cudlipp or any other regime". But when Young asked him later whether he could produce a front page he exploded: "Not only could. I do. Go and talk to the new editor. I'm rather good at designing front pages".

All of which reminded me of the one and only time I have met Mr Maxwell. It was at a luncheon he gave for columnists and editorial staff on the *London Daily News* shortly before the ill-fated paper was launched. There were also some senior *Mirror* executives among the company. It was the day that Prince Edward had quit the Royal Marines. Upon arrival in the Publisher's Office at the top of the Mirror building, we were ushered into 'Maxwell House', the unique blend of Louis *Quatorze* and South Fork decor which is Mr Maxwell's London base.

Luncheon was served in the dining room where Cecil King used to plan his abortive *coups* against Harold Wilson. To my relief I found myself seated way below the salt and settled down to enjoy a quiet lunch. But it was not to be. Mine host thumped the table and said: "Ladies and gentlemen, I invited you here not only to make your acquaintance but also to ascertain from you what you think my new paper should stand for. So I shall expect you to sing for your suppers. And I shall start with you, Julian", he said, turning to a startled Julian Critchley, MP, who happened to be seated at his left.

The Hon Member for Aldershot murmured some elegant platitudes and passed the parcel to his neighbour who in turn uttered some high-minded sentiments. The paper should be truthful, should not invade people's privacy, should be entertaining to read, and so on. Mr Maxwell nodded his vigorous agreement with these unremarkable propositions.

This went on all round the table, with each succeeding guest embellishing a portrait of a newspaper which was to be the publishing equivalent of Caesar's wife. By the time my turn came I was too drunk and bored to conform. "The purpose of a newspaper", I said, "is to make trouble". At this a deathly hush fell on the company. "How to you mean 'trouble'?", asked mine host. "Well", I said, "first of all trouble for the government". He nodded. "Then, trouble for the City of London". Again, a sage nod. "And thirdly", said I, thinking that it

was as well to be hung for a sheep as a lamb, "trouble for its proprietor".

At this point the only sound to be heard was the terrified whimpering of *Mirror* executives who had taken up defensive positions under the table. "Would you care to explain?" asked Mr Maxwell, in a voice of bottled thunder. "Well", I said, "if I'd been writing my column today I'd have said that it was high time British society decided whether a spell in the Royal Marines was a fit training for a human being, never mind a Prince of the Blood".

Mr Maxwell then gave me forcibly to understand that if I had tried to say such a thing in his newspaper he would have been Very Greatly Displeased. Indeed, he would have spiked it. At this, the wretched editor of the embryonic newspaper emitted a cry somewhere between a yelp and a gasp. I requested an explanation of this repressive position, to which Maxwell replied that while it was one thing for an unknown columnist like me to say such things, it was quite another for a great national newspaper to do so. "If I were to publish such a column", he said, "it would be tantamount to giving a message to the Youth of This Country that it is acceptable to renege on a commitment if the going gets tough". I sat there speechless, flabbergasted at the pomposity of the man. The remainder of the company studied their fingernails while surreptitiously plotting the line to the nearest exit. Silence reigned. Eventually another guest - Ms Tessa Blackstone - spoke. "Bullshit, Bob", said she. Hugo Young ought to have said the same.