

It was but a small step from concealing conditions at the front to ignoring German victories. Retreats became strategic retirements, evacuations were rectifications of the line, and a defeat such as that at the Somme in July 1916—perhaps the most bloody defeat in Britain’s history—brought only bland, innocuous reports, with nothing to show that the Allies had not had a good day, or even a victory. Gibbs, in fact, wrote in his dispatch: “It is, on balance, a good day for England and France. It is a day of promise in this war...” Gibbs excused himself later with this explanation: “I have had to spare the feelings of men and women, who have sons and husbands still fighting in France.”²⁶ Beach Thomas confessed after the war what had really happened about the correspondents’ reports at the Somme. Just before the battle, the Chief of Intelligence, General Charteris, arrived at the correspondents’ quarters and briefed them on the Allied plans. During the battle, dispatch riders came up at regular intervals with progress reports, and on the authority of these “we sent off in common a short cable message to say all went well for England and France.” But, as Beach Thomas and the others quickly realised, the message was untrue, and the great part of the intelligence supplied to them had been utterly wrong and misleading. “I was thoroughly and deeply ashamed of what I had written,” Beach Thomas confessed, “for the good reason that it was untrue ...the vulgarity of enormous headlines and the enormity of one’s own name did not lessen the shame.”²⁷

But an incident involving Keith Murdoch, a young