

# TURNING THE PAGES

*The Story of Bookselling  
in New Zealand*



*Anna Rogers and Max Rogers*

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*Foreword by Fiona Kidman*



for Booksellers New Zealand

decided that, when he put on civvies again, he wanted to be his own boss. In 1946, with £100 in borrowed capital, he opened Modern Educational Publications, always known as MEP, in a little shop near the junction of Courtenay Place and Taranaki Street. Eleven years later came a move to the newly built Williams & Adams building nearby in Taranaki Street. 'We took nothing to the new shop,' Frank recalled — everything was new, including adjustable metal shelves, used for the first time in a New Zealand bookshop.

Although MEP originally stocked a large percentage of religious books, it was not long before Frank Barnard decided to concentrate on the technical titles for which his shop became well known throughout New Zealand. Self-confessedly 'system crazy', Frank kept track of his large stock, often of single titles, by means of a revolutionary and sophisticated card and tape recorder system, which has been copied by other booksellers.

The shop flourished, a mail order business served customers throughout the country and Frank also expanded into wholesaling, testing the waters with the popular annual publication, *Automobile Year*. Always a man with an eye to possible sales, Frank worked hard at generating them — he soon cornered the wholesale and retail market for motoring books and magazines — and he and his fulltime staff of five (including his wife Fiona, who worked in the shop for many years) knew their customers well. Among their regular clients was Sir Len Southward, who had a standing order for any books on motor museums.

Along with the other 'young guns' of the 1950s such as Roy Parsons and Blackwood Paul, Frank Barnard helped to alter the complexion of the Booksellers Association; he was a councillor for 21 years. He was involved in the introduction of book tokens, in bookselling courses (as an organiser and a lecturer), in the purchase of Book House, in the national pricing of books and in the introduction of universal trade packaging for books that could be used by booksellers throughout New Zealand. Frank and Roy Parsons, starting in business at the same time, remained close allies. Frank recalled their race to reach a turnover of \$100,000. Roy, at that stage running two shops, one day sent Frank a card — '\$100,000 — beat that'. Frank's reply was — '\$97,000 with only one shop. How's that?'

After 27 years in the trade, Frank and Fiona sold MEP in 1973. Their success, Frank believed, came from 'staying small' and specialising. And the Barnards obviously enjoyed their bookselling years — it was, said Frank, 'a lovely business to be in'.

In the last year of the Souths' era, 1953, Jack Haines, who represented Penguin Books, persuaded Harry South to stock the complete range of Penguin titles in his Times Book Club branch at 53 Willis Street. The premises were redesigned to be a 'new, light' home for face-out displays of Penguin paperbacks. Known then as the Penguin Bookshop, this thriving business had been going for less than six months when Souths folded.

David Archer, then working at Souths' 8 Willis Street shop, was approached

to take over the business, to 'save it from Whitcombe & Tombs'. He did so, for the next 15 years running what was rechristened the Phoenix Bookshop. David gradually expanded the stock beyond Penguins, although they were always an important ingredient, to sell other paperbacks and complementary titles. His strong interest in amateur theatre, particularly Wellington's Unity Theatre and the New Zealand Players, led to the Phoenix becoming a centre for theatrical activities in the capital. David would arrange displays in the shop to accompany the plays being performed in town; he recalled Barbara Jefford and Keith Michell, then starring in the New Zealand Players' production of *The Lady's Not for Burning*, coming to see his window display.

School and university business helped to keep David afloat, especially as city rents zoomed. Eventually, however, he lost the lease on the building, which was bought by a developer. Forced to move out, he tried a year in Bond Street but times were bad and with two young children to support David decided it was time to stop. He was fortunate and delighted to find a job as Upper Hutt city librarian, a post he filled happily for the next 15 years before his retirement in 1982.

In September 1967 the following advertisement appeared in Wellington newspapers:

A NEW BOOKSHOP  
OPENS TOMORROW IN WILLIS STREET

Name:

UNITY BOOKS

Situation:

GROUND FLOOR ENTRANCE, EMPIRE BUILDING  
opposite the Grand Hotel.

Stock: Fiction — Non-fiction — Literature — Art — Music — Classics  
New Zealand Books

The Empire Building is no longer there, its place taken by the towering black slab of the BNZ. The Grand Hotel, too, has gone, turned into an arcade. But, to the joy of many of the capital's book-loving inhabitants, Unity Books is still part of a rapidly changing Wellington, in a new home at Perrett's Corner (itself now much altered).

The man who opened that first small Unity shop is Alan Preston, a Wellingtonian who began his working life as an accountant, amassing valuable experience for the day when he could open his own bookshop. In the 1950s Alan spent four years in the Wellington office of Gordon & Gotch, before, in 1958, following a well-established New Zealand book trade tradition and moving to Whitcombe & Tombs. But he was not in the Lambton Quay office long; for the next eight years Whitcombes gave him the job of looking after the office of Souths Book Depot Ltd at 8 Willis Street. Whitcombe & Tombs had bought out the Souths chain in 1953 and Alan oversaw the closing down

of several Souths branches. In 1966 a fire at the Willis Street building meant a return to Whitcombes, but by Christmas of that year Alan had moved further along Lambton Quay to join Ferguson & Osborn, as accountant.

After five months, Alan fulfilled his ambition to start his own business. The Oxford University Press showroom in the Empire Building became available and, with help from his family, he was able to buy Empire Building Ltd shares and open Unity Books. Inside an old building, the modest shop was some 15 metres from the pavement and its saw-toothed display shelves made it only a metre or so wide at its narrowest point. Alan and his father Cyril ran the shop for the first 16 months until they were joined by Bob Dempsey from Wellington Polytechnic, who became a director in 1971. (Bob returned to the polytechnic in 1972, but remained a director.) In 1972, also, Unity moved across the road and down a bit, to 42 Willis Street, the shop many Unity devotees recall with particular affection.

When, 10 years later, the shop was damaged by smoke and water after the restaurant upstairs was gutted by fire, the *Listener* 'Bookmarks' column noted the event. Despite losing books, a lot of personal material and a day's takings while the shop was cleaned up, Alan remained philosophical — 'When you're in a business like mine, you need a bit of reassurance from time to time . . . When something like this happens, you get feedback. People being concerned about the shop reinforces my belief that the rewards aren't all monetary.'

Alan's longtime customer and friend, historian Colin Davis, spoke for many in his fond memories of Cyril Preston, a 'jewel of a man'. Self-confessedly not a reader — 'don't need an anaesthetic, son, just give me a book' — Cyril nevertheless loved people and his presence in the shop added tremendously to the welcoming, talk-filled atmosphere for which Unity became well known. Alan recalled his father's pride one day when he reported, 'Well, son, I've just sold some of your tough stuff'; the books in question were philosophy titles.

Unity was always more than a bookshop. People came to 42 Willis Street to exchange ideas; books were launched there; writers became lasting friends. When Denis Glover complained, in his 'raspy voice', about his problems in selling his beautifully produced Catspaw Press titles, Alan offered to wholesale the books for him and did so, sending Glover a quarterly return until the 'splendid old wreck' (as Lauris Edmond described him) died a few years later.

After 14 years at 42 Willis Street, Unity moved again, this time to brand-new premises at Perrett's Corner. As Lauris Edmond, loyal Unity friend and customer, recalled on the shop's 20th anniversary in 1987, this 'move upmarket' was depressing at first.

My precious little establishment, hiding the fact that it was the nation's best bookshop under a homely exterior, suddenly looked just like any other successful business. I mooched about among the stylish racks and shelves, glaring out through acres of plate glass, mumbled insincerely to Alan and Nigel and Jo that it was just what we all wanted. I was wrong of course because in fact it was. Now, with the famous lunchtime readings and 6 o'clock book launchings, it's well into

a new phase, a present and future even more distinguished than its past.

Nigel and Jo were Nigel Cox and Jo Harris, who now run Unity Books in Auckland's High Street. This new northern Unity — included by *Metro* magazine in its Christmas 1991 list of the 200 best things about Auckland — was opened in September 1988, beginning its life as a bargain bookshop and becoming Unity proper in February 1989. Nigel Cox joined Unity in Wellington on 2 August 1982 (a day that marked the 'opportunity of a lifetime'); Jo Harris, who is a granddaughter of G.H. Bennett, had been on the staff in the late 1970s, and rejoined later in December 1982.

Their predecessors in the 1970s — Bob Dempsey, Prue de Villiers, Sue Beaton — and the present Wellington staff, headed by Louise Wrightson, have all brought their own skills and interests to Unity, helping to make it a bookshop which, as Alan has always insisted that it must, gives people access to the books they want to read, to books that reflect and explain the times in which they live.

The stock in a bookshop must carry the 'imprimatur of the people'; a bookseller should not sell what he or she thinks is good or enjoyable, but should 'think in other people's terms'. Otherwise a bookshop (and its staff) 'can become terribly pedantic and offputting'. That philosophy has ensured that Unity has always been a place where, to use Alan's phrase, the 'tide of knowledge breaks on the shore', providing the books that people need and want — whether it be copies of *Mein Kampf*, long unavailable in New Zealand and purchased largely by school libraries when Alan brought copies in from the United States, or the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, imported by controversial publisher Alister Taylor and sold by Unity in huge numbers in the 1970s.

It was Unity's 25th birthday in September 1992. Louise Wrightson, whose has been manager since January 1989, celebrated the achievement with a Very Short Story Competition, for which entrants had to write 200 words beginning 'The moment I walked into Unity Books . . .' The response was 'fantastic', bringing in imaginative and funny entries, and some that were 'quite bizarre'. For some people it was their first attempt at creative writing. Booksellers and bookshops owe so much to writers. It's encouraging to know that we have a community of potential authors.'

For customers, staff, writers, reps and publishers, Unity Books remains a special place, a 'real bookshop'. To quote Lauris Edmond again, 'Neither of the great forces can touch it — not the dismantlers of Wellington who knock down brick by brick, nor the goblins of the market who work to make books the price of diamonds. It triumphs over both. It is indestructible.'

It was the end of the third term, 1962. Steven Sedley was tired of teaching and ready for a change. Then he saw an advertisement for what seemed a 'dream job'. Ralph Gooderidge at Oxford University Press in Wellington wanted someone to oversee and sell OUP's educational publishing side and build up a New

Zealand educational publishing programme. For nine years Steven travelled around the country, amassing valuable knowledge about educational books and the schools who bought them. At the end of this time, Ralph Gooderidge — that 'wonderful character, absolutely unsinkable' — was due to retire and Steven, now in his late 30s, decided to strike out on his own.

There was no bookshop in the area to serve the needs of schools in the Hutt Valley. With educational and library sales as a foundation, Steven believed he could run a 'nice, literary, upmarket bookshop'. The Horizon Bookshop was opened in 1970; the Sedleys were the first tenants in a brand-new building in Lower Hutt's Queens Drive. Later Steven was able to visit schools, building up the educational side of the business. Horizon has always been strong in children's books, too.

The business continued to expand but, by the mid-1970s, Steven's competitors in the educational field were doing much more 'wheeling and dealing' and it became harder to maintain the buying loyalty of some schools. Although educational business remained (as it still does) a big part of Horizon's turnover, Steven reduced staff numbers. Changing shopping patterns had their effect, too. The pedestrian flow dropped and, with the threat of the big Queensgate shopping complex also looming, Steven decided it was time for a move. Horizon moved to its present home on the corner of High Street and Waterloo Road in 1981.

By the mid-1980s Steven was taking a 'dim, gloomy view' of the future for independent retailers. Where once publishing companies had been headed by salesmen who were 'visionaries and optimists', now they were run by 'accountants who by training are pessimists'. Steven believed that 'pure bookselling was finished' and that it was a case of 'go with the pack, or go under', so Horizon became part of the new Paper Plus network of shops then spreading throughout the country.

To Steven, the theory of trying to sell to the 80 percent of people who do not usually buy books is a fallacy. Booksellers have to sell to the 20 percent — 'their own customers' — and they have to 'generate excitement' about books. Steven has also learned not to make judgements about customers. One day, early in his bookselling career, some 'real cowboys' came into the shop. After spending a lot of time looking at the shelves, they came over and asked for a copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Steven ordered this for them and they returned regularly to buy more 'real books'.

Horizon has a strong tradition of involvement in the community. From the shop's early days there has been 'an annual shindig for local authors' and Steven has helped and advised many local writers, among them Lynley Dodd, whose children's books have become an international publishing success.

'At their best, books take a person into a fuller life, towards truth. They penetrate life and death and interpret the experience of any activity to find what life is about. God intends people to find out what life is about.' The man who

said those words — to a *Thursday* magazine interviewer in November 1973 — was Paraparaumu bookseller Ian Fisher, who opened his shop in the Copperfield complex in 1971. Fisher was determined to sell only books — 'I decided we would not carry magazines, dog collars, candles, Tatts tickets or plastic buckets. If I couldn't make a living selling books I'd pack it in — this isn't Woolworths.'

Fifty percent of the business at Ian Fisher Bookseller was done at the weekends in those days when Paraparaumu shops were unusual in being open on Saturdays (and most public holidays). Ian's wife Doreen would look after the shop every Tuesday when her husband travelled into Wellington to buy from the publishers' warehouses. (Major publishers were still a force in the capital in those days.)

Before he became a bookseller, Fisher did a three-and-a-half-year stint in the British Army and later worked for other booksellers and as a publisher's rep in Britain and New Zealand. He also 'swotted and sweated for six years to take the United Kingdom Booksellers' Diploma'. A strong opponent of stock control by publishers — 'It is a denial of the bookseller's joy' — Ian Fisher stocked the books he believed were good. 'This way,' he told *Thursday*, 'the shop is just like my own living room — except that I don't have quite so many books in my own living room.' Carefully selected remaindered books were also a part of the Fisher shop.

To break down people's inhibitions about entering a bookshop, Ian Fisher 'serenaded' them, 'playing everything from the Beatles to Mozart, from Simon and Garfunkel to Handel' on his record player. A 50cc Yamaha power cycle that cost 30c a week in petrol gradually gave way to a 'smart little Mini'. A heart attack in 1973 took Fisher away from his beloved shop for a time, but his wife and friends kept things going so that, by the end of that year, he could write in a *New Zealand Bookworld* feature article:

I have had the wonderful experience of running and building a bookshop. I have done everything from planning advertising to cleaning the windows. More than this, I have sold good books and helped to enrich other lives. I have fed the family, the cats and the mortgages, and I have had two of the most fulfilling years of my whole life.

That life was to be tragically short; Ian Fisher died in the late 1970s.

'We'll make it up,' said Viv Walker encouragingly when her friend, Louise Wrightson, protested that she knew nothing about bookselling. Although both had young children, the two women were keen to embark on creating a bookshop together. Having thought their philosophy through carefully, and done some 'bookshop crawls' to study display and shop fittings, they opened the PSIS Bookshop in 1978. With financial backing from the then flush PSIS, whose manager was keen on books, they set up their business in the front of the PSIS building on the corner of Featherston and Ballance Streets.