

# Better book buys as prices slowly drop

A CONSTANT complaint from New Zealand bookbuyers seems to have quietly come right. For about as long as New Zealanders have been buying overseas books there have been grizzles about availability and price. Buyers have long noted cheaper prices for US editions on cover jackets, and not unreasonably wondered why we should be compelled to buy dearer British-sourced versions and often wait an unreasonably long time for them to arrive. It's seemed as if New Zealanders were being asked not only to submit to a filter of British editorial taste but to support the old mother country's inefficiency as well.

But now, New Zealand buyers are not only getting improved access but very often cheaper books than American or British consumers, as well. And in large part the improvement serves as a yet another, albeit late, marker in the sapping of old imperial links.

For a register of better times talk to the manager of Unity Books in Auckland Nigel Cox. Four years ago, when the shop opened, he was angry about what he saw as abuse of the local readers' goodwill. "Bullying", "sinister" and "cynically downgrading" are only a few of the descriptions he's ascribed to a publishing industry that normally likes to think of itself as being made up of literate, pretty nice people.

But these days, using recent examples, he can put a fairly convincing argument to show just how much the industry has improved.

Allowing for currency differences, taxes and distribution, Cox calculates that Armistead Maupin's *Maybe The Moon* has a British equivalent price of \$67.45, an American price of \$64.46, but sells here for \$39.95. *The Oxford Shorter Dictionary* is \$65 cheaper than its British equivalent.

"So," says Cox. "This is a good news story. And for me it's been a slow steady turn around. I'm not in a hurry here to praise publishers for doing real well, but in fact real efforts are being made to get the price down here in New Zealand."

Just why the situation has improved can be put down to several causes. It's widely agreed that booksellers' and

● Books are cheaper, Robert Mannion finds, and part of the reason is a further diluting of old imperial links.

publishers' margins are down. But along with market changes the shift also has some broader echoes.

Once New Zealand glowed proudest in a world largely coloured pink. Now, although most books are still British-sourced it seems the days when colonial custom could be taken for granted are finally passing.

Without himself attaching any particular post-colonial significance to the trend, Cox describes an erosion of old links from two directions. There's an increasing American influence, and across the Tasman new legislation has forced publishers to offer better availability and pricing to customers in Australia.

Territorial copyright laws have been at the heart of the debate. These allow an author, or a controlling publisher, to sell the rights to a book to a different publisher for each country. By tradition, rights have been sold to one publisher in America and another, invariably British, for the countries of the former empire.

A second development, with a move to the suspiciously unentrepreneurially named "closed market" in the 1970s, meant booksellers could only buy from overseas publishers' locally established branches.

Copyright law, of course, exists to protect the rights of the book's creator. But Consumers Institute chief executive David Russell says this has often translated into a British publisher choosing to fluff around with the publication of a book, or boost its price, in a market in which they face no competition.

Certainly, the Consumers Institute has been critical of publishers in the past. And to obtain overseas books many buyers have resorted to bookshops discreetly/illegally importing American editions or international book order agencies. No one argues, either, that there are still counter-examples to the generally positive trend.

Tandem managing director



Nigel Cox of Unity Books in Auckland . . . a good news story.

Photo, JOHN SELKIRK

Bob Ross says the British paperback of Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance* actually cost more than the American hardback. Booker co-winner Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* was for a while unavailable here — although Penguin's managing director Tony Harkins says his company did go to the unusual and profit-savaging expense of airfreighting the book in after it had won the award.

But Wellington bookseller John Ahradsen confirms there's broad agreement that customers get better value now, and even cites examples of titles published here before they were available in the UK.

The big picture is one of a slow unravelling of traditional market control. Bob Ross dates it back to American anti-trust rulings of 20 years ago requiring publishers to negotiate titles individually and market by market.

Since then there's been increased link-ups between American and British publishers and an increased American publishing presence here. Bob Ross says many now deal direct with companies such as his, "and if we are doing a good job they don't need to try and sell to Britain."

The once maligned closed-market, too, has brought ad-

vantages. Wellington publisher Brigit Williams says its brought multinationals into New Zealand leading to better promotion and resources to distribute wider ranges.

But the final tilt came from an embryonically republican Australian campaign. A few years ago author Peter Carey made the wine glasses tinkle in accepting an award when he protested, "we never had a revolution to kick the British out of Australia, I think it's now time to kick them out of our copyright territory."

Since then, New Zealanders have had much of their work done for them. Australian le-

gislation now requires publishers to ensure prompt availability and competitive prices. We've benefitted from the flow-on.

For the future, some fear that margins may get so low multinationals — which reportedly operate here on much lower profits than they'd care to admit — might close local branches.

Another fear is that bigger retail chains will gain too much control and limit availability to best-sellers only. If so, New Zealanders will at least know it's local rather than foreign avarice they are up against.

● Passion tames the stinging tail, according to this report from Rebecca Norris and Anna Kominik

## Winter wasps blunted by love

PEOPLE worried by the wasps now swarming throughout the country can relax — they're interested only in love.

Landcare scientist Jacqueline Beggs says while the swarming males, or drones, look fearful they do not sting. They are good only for breeding and survive only two or three weeks.

They leave their nests this time of the year in search of queens which do sting. Worker wasps also sting.

"We get a lot of people ringing up worried about the swarms but they need not be concerned about being stung.

"Bees do, however, form swarms though not to breed, but form new hives," she says.

Ms Beggs says people tend to confuse bees and wasps though bees are easily recognised by their fluffy exterior, pollen sacs on their legs, golden-yellow colour and chunkier overall appearance.

Despite popular belief, Ms Beggs says anybody can develop a severe reaction to wasp stings, regardless of how often they have been stung before.

The most common reaction to a sting is swelling, though a number of people develop breathing difficulties which may ultimately kill them.

An Australian official was recently killed by an unidentified species of wasp.

Ms Beggs says she can recall only one death of this kind in New Zealand but reminds people to be wary of what may be a fatal reaction to wasp stings.

"If you disturb a nest, don't stand still or you'll be covered in stings. Wasps take a few seconds to react to vibrations so the first in a group may escape unscathed. The tail-enders get the lot."

Ms Beggs says the most

common type of wasp in New Zealand are vespulids, a German wasp first introduced during World War II. Others include the Commonwealth, introduced in the late 1970s, and Asian and Australian Paper species.

Found commonly at the top of the North Island, the Australian species has been around since the turn of the century, while the Asian was introduced in the late 1970s.

She says the Asians were first discovered in 1979, though no one is sure how they arrived.

Otago University zoologist Henrik Moller says wasp numbers appear to have dropped slightly this year but it was too early to celebrate. Dr Moller said it was too early to determine whether the decrease was a long term trend. In his experience if numbers dropped over a couple of years they were likely to surge again shortly afterwards. He said the hunt was now on for something new to control wasps.

"A colleague and I are currently looking at bringing in a worm which I call 'the alien'. It lives inside the wasp, sterilising it while also making it very thirsty.

"When the wasp goes to drink, the worm bursts through the side of the wasp and grabs hold of a rock or stick which kills the wasp as it tries to get away."

Already in use in America and Europe, initial New Zealand trials show the worm, *Pheronermis* nematode, commonly known as a roundworm, to be effective.

The only question that remains is whether the worm would turn on something else if it was brought into the New Zealand, he said.

"Ultimately we need to find something soon as the wasps have the potential to have a significant effect on our native birds and insects, the extent of which we are still measuring," Mr Henrik says.

### THE WEEK

#### they said it

"The company . . . believes that the accident will have no substantial financial impact on the group as the contribution of the associated [Thai] company to the group's profits has been insignificant."

— Retired United States army general Norman Schwarzkopf making his case against lifting the ban on homosexuals in the military.

#### in retrospect

##### Sunday

The generals commanding government and rebel Serb forces in Bosnia sign a new ceasefire.

STAY OR QUIT