

Migel's

I don't have to be there to be sure that there are people from everywhere, with immensely varied interests, gathered here for Alan. My point is, this is what Alan was all about. He said it often: books were how people connected. That is what he wanted his bookshop to do.

I worked closely with Alan for a decade. What I mean is, for a particular period. Everybody who knew him or worked in the bookshop for a spell will have their own view of him, and of the shop - of course. But only Alan was there all the way through. The shop expressed what was essential about Alan in an extraordinary and public way. Which is remarkable, really, given what a private man he was. But that's how I see his shop - as the public expression of him.

I originally met him as a customer. Unity was, during the late 1960s, one of the institutions which made me feel that the ideas I was excited by were shared by others. Shopping there, you were aware of someone who was around, not watching exactly, not presiding over, but there - behind all this. Someone you could talk to - I remember talking to him, even back then - this was in the shop at 42 Willis Street - I guess I would been nineteen. Alan talked to everyone.

He was some talker. Talk was always serious with Alan - he took everything you said to the highest level. In his own talk there were phrases that kept coming up and which I will always associate with him. "I seem to shed more heat than light on these occasions," was an Alan favourite. "What I have to keep telling myself is..."; "I would be the last to know." Hear there the steady base of self-deprecation. But it was the themes of his conversation that mattered. He was always talking about the search for the new thing - "that's what quickens me," he'd say. And you knew that he meant it. Yes, it was important that the bookshop be financially successful. But more important was the way that it carried ideas - "that it's relevant," he would say. These ideas were important not to somebody else - of course, to them too - but to him. Some books were so important to him - "hugely



important," as he would have put it – for instance, Paul Fussell's "The Great War And Modern Memory." He must have talked to me about that book a hundred times.

That will always be my strongest memory of him – standing in the aisle at 42 Willis Street, talking - the immensely firm man wearing what I once called "the trouser-coloured trousers." Alan's vyella shirts, his polished brown shoes, the soft green ties – these will go on forever. The glasses the shape of old TV sets, and in them milky eyes full of what I can only call mild intensity, if that makes sense. Leaning forward slightly, bending sharply from the waist when particularly engaged. Passionate – absolutely shaking with passion at times – listening hard to what you were saying and stroking his chin thoughtfully, eyes going up, as he filed away what you'd said. The next day it would come round again – he'd been thinking... In a certain way he was a baton carrier. Someone would say something to him and then one of the many people who saw Unity as a place they should visit once a day would come in, and the baton would be passed.

Everyone who worked for Alan will know how he gave his staff the chance to do their all with his shop. This was extraordinary. That he loved the shop so much, and yet he'd encourage you do take hold of it and make something new of it. Take it further. Each of us was given a chance to take the wheel, to offer what we had, and then move on. It is a very, very hard place to leave and, like so many others, I never really have – but that I think is what we owe it to Alan to remember and get right – his legacy is that spirit where the cast changes but the essence stays the same. In this way he gave all of us – I guess I am speaking particularly for myself here, but I imagine everyone shares this view – the most extraordinary opportunity to experiment, to learn. It was the making of me, working for Alan Preston.

He was just so supportive of writers. I think it's easy to forget, now that the place of those who write has become more or less part of everyday New Zealand life, that it was not always so. But the Unity files are full of grateful letters from people like Curnow and Glover (on the label of a gin bottle) and many others, expressing the sense they have that



someone is behind them, on their side. Obviously, I loved this while I was working at the shop. Alan created a world where writers and writing mattered.

Forgive me if I climb onto my high horse for a moment and try to say something about what his shop has meant to our culture. We all have our fears and doubts about what the place of books will be in the future. But something will endure. That is because people like Alan have made it so. To me he made what might be called a culture machine - something that generated meaning. Obviously, everything generates meaning. So now I have to talk about what might be called "the good". I don't mean in the religious sense, though maybe the ghost of that is in here. But Alan was always determined to make a bookshop that promoted what was good in society. He talked about it constantly. This was what he saw himself as trying to do.

I once asked Alan what it was he wanted, for himself. I had to drag it out of him. He said, some recognition of this. I continue to hope that it might be possible.

I did attempt at one time, with Fiona Kidman and Bill Manhire, to have Alan awarded an honour at New Years. This was unsuccessful. What I remember from that was the great difficulty I had trying say why what had essentially been the development and running of a successful retail business was so culturally important. Phrases like "he invested in stock rather than taking profit" seemed not quite adequate. But I do think that another aspect of what Alan did is to illustrate a model of a capitalist enterprise entirely governed by high ideals and yet capable of financial stability. And this in an industry that routinely complains how it would so like to sell better books, if only it could afford to...

He was not always an easy person to understand. Others will I'm sure make a better job of expressing how Alan had his own way of looking at everything, how what was obvious to you could be something quite different for him. What I'm trying to say here may be no more than that he was utterly distinctive; utterly himself. I always sensed in him a passionate



longing to keep going – to keep going further. He was very brave, actually. He would tell you about his fears, and he would work on them.

He always described himself as ordinary. I don't think anyone here needs to be convinced that obviously he wasn't. But what he would never admit to was any lyricism. He applauded everything you ever put forward in this line, marveled at it. But to me he was the one who got right the hardest thing of all. There wasn't a day, working at Unity, that I didn't marvel at the absolute rightness of that name. It's the word I'll always most strongly connect with Alan – of course, in connection with the shop, which of course will go on forever. But also for the way it expressed, and will always express, the marvelous, generous, humanistic, public-spirited optimism of the man.