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Wellington's Unity Books: Confidently Going Forward

17 Jun 2010



Unity Books Wellington has just renewed the lease on their Willis Street premises for a lengthy period, so it is good to see such defiance of doom and gloom. The store will also grow larger when Unity's landlords refurbish the frontage of their building and Unity incorporates part of the entrance lobby into the shop. Tilly Lloyd is not unmindful of the risks, but is "reasonably confident that the paper book will continue to exist and will be needed". She says, "The refit will be something like a second revised edition".

Unity Books is certainly a valued Wellington institution and has weathered a few challenges since the store was founded in 1967 by Alan Preston.

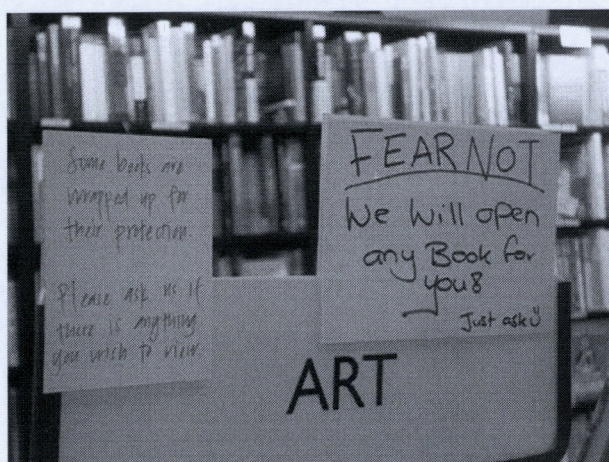


[Tilly Lloyd points to a picture of Alan Preston; Marion Castree, Tilly and Dylan Sherwood]

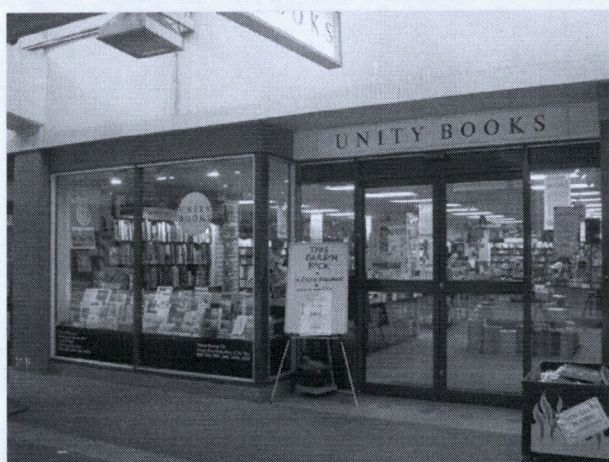
Lloyd began working at Unity in 1990 as a buyer, after spells of repping for Century Hutchinson and Penguin, working for Wellington's feminist bookshop and a period at Book House as information officer and editor of Booksellers News.

So when she bought a half share in Unity Wellington along with Lawrie and Jo McColl from Alan Preston's estate in 2004 it was effectively a management buyout. "The staff over all the years had created the creature," says Lloyd. "So rather making radical changes it was more a matter of sticking to the knitting, doing business as usual as a literary bookseller."





Unity Wellington is quite an elegant bookstore, with its timber tables and shelving all specially made when the store moved to its third site on Willis Street 12 years ago. Lloyd gives tribute to Heather McKenzie, then Unity's buyer, for the design and detailing of the fittings. They have certainly stood the test of time – Lloyd says several out-of-town and overseas booksellers have come in to measure the tables to recreate their proportions in their own stores. So that's not going to change when the expansion happens; what is arranged is that NZ titles, fiction, kids' and art books will grow their space.



The changes to copyright law in New Zealand benefitted Unity's style of bookselling as right from Preston's day they had sourced titles from big American suppliers like Baker and Taylor. When parallel importing was allowed, that aspect of the business became easier. These imports often end up being exclusive, and have been a big factor in creating Unity's point of difference and attracting a loyal customer following.

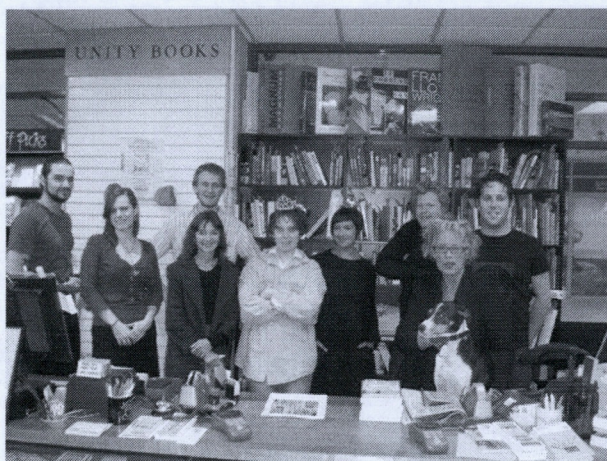
"Many publishers assume that all our imports are parallel imports; that's far from the case. Sometimes it is a convenience thing when the local distributors do not hold stock in Australasia, more likely it occurs when the title is not available through local sources." Having said that, Lloyd notes that the hardback edition of *The Passage* is much cheaper ex-US. (Unity bought the TPB from Hachette New Zealand.)

The challenges of contemporary bookselling she sees as the advent of digital books, and the distribution changes of the past few years with a major shift to Australian distribution. In marketing there are issues around fair terms of trade and the use of exclusives. "It's not all peachy. For instance we are still dissed by some publishers for the kind of parallel importing we do. Fortunately we have enough wine for our in-store Ethics Subcommittee. But let those warehouses get their supply chain in order."

Lloyd says ruefully that at times she is in conflict with suppliers. "That is hard because there are amazing persons in the trade; we are friends, we've grown up together, but there are times when Unity has to stand firm on business issues."

That said, she points out that 16 percent of the store's turnover last year was in New Zealand and non-16 percent. "The market share for New Zealand titles is usually larger, but there was a slowdown last year in the number of titles published. This is good, if it means an increase in quality".

Unity Wellington has survived recent trade challenges. When Borders opened on Lambton Quay in 2007 they carried American books in stock, so they were competitors for the niche Unity had secured for itself. Lloyd's counter-tactics were first, to trade on, and second to increase promotions, particularly new New Zealand titles, to keep their image prominent.



[L-R: Matt, Katherine, Marion, Cameron behind Marion, Finn, Kiran, Tobias, Tilly (with Rhon the shop dog), & Dylan]

As always, the kind of articulate people working at the shop make all the difference. "This is a shop with opinion and warmth and I feel this is part of why we are seen as a bit of an oasis.

"We are advantaged to be part of bigger pictures too. There's the local literary landscape which is very distinctive and provides us an extraordinary wealth of socialising and writing and events. And we are part of the independent booksellers' scene. And our own local scenes. These things keep us strong and keep us thinking".

Unity survived the hard times, but were saddened to see that near neighbour, colleague and friendly competitor Dymocks went under with the forces of competition and recession.

Though she observes that the world seems to be coming out of the current recession, Lloyd's management of Unity Wellington is canny. "The small expansion planned won't have too much money thrown at it, the aim being to enhance the store just the way it is now" - an independent bookshop par excellence.

Publisher/Bookseller:

[Unity Books \(Wellington\) Ltd](http://www.directory/unity-books-wellington-ltd) ([./directory/unity-books-wellington-ltd](http://www.directory/unity-books-wellington-ltd))

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June 17 Unity Wgtn

Wellington's Unity Books: Confidently Going Forward

Unity Books Wellington has just renewed the lease on their Willis Street premises for a lengthy period, so it is good to see such defiance of doom and gloom. The store will also grow a little bit larger when Unity's landlords refurbish the frontage of their building and incorporate a small part of the entrance foyer to extend Unity's premises.

Tilly Lloyd is not unmindful of the risks, but says she is "Reasonably confident that the paper book will continue to exist and will be needed". Unity Books is certainly a valued Wellington institution and has no doubt come through a few crises since the store was founded in 1967 by Alan Preston.

Lloyd began working at Unity in 1990 as a buyer, after spells of repping for Century Hutchinson, working for Wellington's feminist bookshop and a period at Book House as information officer and editor of Booksellers News.

So when she bought a half share in Unity Wellington along with Laurie (sp) and Jo McColl from Alan Preston's estate in 2004 it was effectively a management buyout. "Jo and I along with many of our long serving staff members had helped create the creature," says Lloyd. "So rather making changes it was more a matter of sticking to the knitting, doing business as usual as a literary bookseller."

Unity Wellington is quite an elegant bookstore, with its timber tables and shelving all specially made when the store moved to Willis Street 12 years ago. Lloyd gives tribute to Heather McKenzie, then Unity's buyer, for the design and detailing of the fittings. They have certainly stood the test of time – Lloyd says out-of-town and even overseas booksellers come in to measure the shelving to recreate its proportions in their own stores. So that's not going to change when the expansion happens; what is arranged is that fiction, kids' and art books will grow their shelf space.

The changes to copyright law in New Zealand benefitted Unity's style of bookselling as right from Preston's day they had sourced titles from big American suppliers like Baker and Taylor and Ballantines. When parallel importing was allowed, that aspect of the business became easier. These own imports often end up being exclusive, and have been a big factor in creating Unity's point of difference and attracting a loyal customer following.

"Many publishers assume that all our imports are parallel imports; that's far from the case. Sometimes it is a convenience thing when the local distributors do not hold stock in Australasia, more likely it occurs when the title is not available through local sources." Having said that, Lloyd notes that the hardcover collector's edition of *The Passage* she will likely source from the US because of the price advantage. (Unity bought the TPB from Hachette New Zealand.)

The challenges of contemporary bookselling she sees as the advent of digital books, the distribution changes of the past few years with a major shift to Australian distribution. In marketing policies there are issues around exclusives:

"I really don't like it when chains that by and large don't promote literary authors get a six week exclusive headstart on literary titles. I've been offered that myself, I don't want exclusives, that's not in the trade's interests.

"What I've always wanted is really good supply at a really good price."

Lloyd says ruefully that at times she is in conflict with suppliers. "That is hard because there are amazing persons in the trade; we are friends, we've grown up together, but there are times when Unity has to stand firm on business issues."

That said, she points out that 16 percent of the store's turnover last year was in New Zealand fiction and non-fiction titles. "The New Zealand market share is usually larger, but there was a slight slowdown last year in the number of titles published."

Unity Wellington has survived recent trade challenges. When Borders opened on Lambton Quay in (year??) they carried American books in stock, so they were competitors for the niche Unity had secured for itself. Lloyd's counter tactics were first, to stay strong and not to panic, second to increase promotions, particularly new New Zealand titles, to keep their image prominent. Their many long serving staff proved an enormous asset at the time.

Unity survived the hard times, but were saddened to see that near neighbour, colleague and friendly competitor Dymocks went under with the forces of competition and recession.

Though she observes that the world seems to be coming out of the current recession, Lloyd's management of Unity Wellington is canny. The small expansion planned won't have money thrown at it, the aim being to keep store just the way it is now – an independent bookshop *par excellence*.