



Vicious reviews of amateur singers, an ambush of Robert Muldoon and interviews with gnome collectors... Wellington magazines have done all this, and more, over the years. As *FishHead* moves monthly, Max Rashbrooke looks at the journals that have shaped capital life.

Illustration by Alexandra Power

MAG MEN (AND WOMEN)



“This magazine... is made to sell.” Such was the philosophy of the flamboyant Charles Nalder Baeyertz, editor of the literary, musical and cultural magazine *The Triad*, which he ran from a villa in Mt Victoria after moving north from Dunedin in 1909. And sell it did, thanks in part to Baeyertz’s notorious frankness as a critic. He once described a sermon as “adding nothing new to our ignorance of God”, while one set of poems submitted to the magazine was returned with the note, “Publish it? No! Poison yourself first; you’ll be glad of it after.”

Despite expanding into the Australian market in 1915, *The Triad* eventually collapsed in the late 1920s under the weight of misdemeanours by drunken writers, the difficulty of trying to appeal to audiences on both sides of the Tasman, and lawsuits from offended tenors. (The magazine managed to survive one lawsuit after it described a singer as having a voice like “a pig’s whistle”, but lost heavily when it compared another to “a trussed turkey”.)

The experience may have been chastening for other would-be publishers: although Wellington’s twin newspapers, *The Dominion* and the *Evening Post*, flourished in following decades, magazines were in short supply. Victoria University’s student magazine *Salient* started life in the late 1930s, and a short-lived journal called *The Wellingtonian* ran briefly in the 1970s under Ian Fraser, later head of TVNZ. But it wasn’t until the 1980s that magazine publishing properly took flight, as financial reform and cultural change opened up new horizons.

Having seen the phenomenon that was *Metro* being born in Auckland, the capital responded with not one but two arts and politics magazines, *Wellington Cosmo* and *W5*. *Wellington Cosmo* was the brainchild of the ambitious Henry P. Newrick, a founding

member of the *National Business Review* in 1970. Wine writer John Saker, who worked for Newrick, describes his former boss as “a maverick... he saw himself as a Murdoch in the making”. By the early 1980s, Newrick was “a little bit flush”, Saker says, and had decided that Wellington was ready for a colourful, full-gloss publication that would cover the arts, politics, lifestyle, gossip, wine, food and business – everything, in other words, that was happening in the capital.

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Apart from a slight hiccup when he was sued by *Cosmopolitan* and had to change the journal’s name to *Wellington City Magazine* in 1985, Newrick’s venture seemed well timed. Saker, who was *Wellington City Magazine*’s second editor after novelist Lloyd Jones, was chronicling a city in the throes of great change: “It was the 1980s: the Lange government was there, deregulation had occurred, there was money around.” Old buildings were making way for the glass towers that now dominate Wellington’s skyline; businesses were starting up left, right and centre. And so Jones and Saker took to the task of exploring – and finding the story beneath – these tumultuous times. Their features profiled, among other things, the rise and fall of the Ohariu Valley Country Club and the success of 1980s high-flyers Chase Corporation; there were

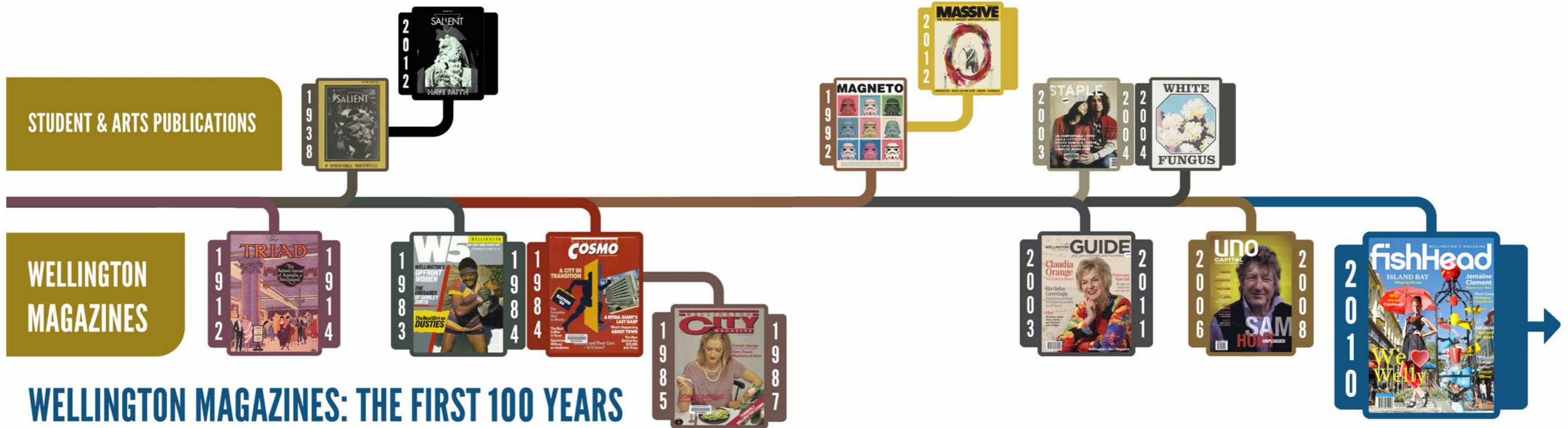
articles entitled ‘Dealers and their cars: is it love?’ and ‘How to spend a million dollars’, but also reportage on the great Wellington architect Ernst Plischke and on underground gambling.

“People used to say that Wellington was dull and grey, a public service town. It wasn’t. There were secret worlds,” Saker says. “There was always a strong gambling community. There was always some interesting music happening. You just had to know where.”

They were, for the most part, good times. The magazine had nice offices on lower Tory Street; its frequency had gone from quarterly to bi-monthly to monthly; circulation was up around 10,000. And its writers had free rein. “Lloyd and I had to pinch ourselves,” Saker says. “We could literally please ourselves [over the content]. There we were, in our early 20s, having the freedom to write whatever we wanted.”

However, in a theme that has become familiar to generations of journalists, money was always a problem. Having come from the Standards Association “with a nice tea lady and a reliable salary”, Saker found that his first *Wellington City Magazine* pay cheque bounced. A routine developed in which Saker would go to Newrick’s office “and in front of Henry there were about four cheque books. He’d say, ‘Give me that’, pull out a cheque book and write another cheque.” (Saker learnt to hate one particular chequebook “because that was the one that always bounced”.)

Wellington City Magazine’s problem was that, as a glossy colour magazine, it was matching the standards of *Metro* and the national titles – but without their audience or, therefore, their ad rates. “Looking back, the maths were always against us,” Saker says. Although by this stage Newrick had a small empire of magazines, including the



New Zealand Financial Review and *New Zealand Slimmer*, the debts mounted, and it all came to an end – as did the boom times – by the end of 1987. Jones was already in New York and Saker had moved to ad agency Colenso; Newrick ended up in the UK, where he now runs various telemarketing businesses, although his activities are still fondly monitored by a group of ‘Henry-watchers’ that includes his former business associate Bob Jones.

At the same time as *Wellington City Magazine’s* rise and fall, author and journalist David McGill was starting up the fortnightly *W5* (standing for why, which, where, when and what), designed to be Wellington’s answer to the London entertainment bible *Time Out*. “It was one of those little ‘finger on the pulse’ type things,” McGill says. “*Capital Times* and *The Wellingtonian* between them would cover that sort of territory [now].”

But *W5* was more than that: its writers also penned what one commentator called “acidulous” articles on current affairs and the media, interviewed controversial figures such as Maori activist Eva Rickard, and, in one glorious moment in mid-1984, ambushed Prime Minister Robert Muldoon as he drove to work. With violence on the increase in New Zealand, the *W5* team had decided they should assess the Prime Minister’s security. So one morning they staked out Vogel House in Lower Hutt, then the PM’s official residence. They photographed Muldoon as he left for the Beehive in his 2.3-litre Ford Sierra, followed him onto the motorway, and then boxed him in, one car ahead and one behind.

“He was driving like a lunatic,” McGill recalls. And, under their pressure, Muldoon proved “an amazing driver – he swerved into the left lane, passed other drivers, and hailed a traffic cop.” The cops duly detained one of the *W5* cars, but McGill got away. Back in his Courtenay Place office, he rang the PM’s staff to explain, and was

rewarded with a phone call from the man himself, who growled, “That McGill? Muldoon here... If I’d had my diplomatic squad around, you’d be in jail.” However, he agreed to an interview, which took place the next week, complete with staff cartoonist Burton Silver (of *Bogor* fame) reading the Prime Minister’s hand. It was the last interview Muldoon gave before his infamous snap election call in June 1984.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these stunts, the magazine folded soon after: again, money was at issue. *W5* was selling a respectable 3000 copies, but had very little advertising. “If we’d hung in [there], or been a bit more judicious...” McGill says, ruminatively. “But we had no advertising... we started with a hiss and a roar, and lasted nine issues before the bank foreclosed.”

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Wellington had another publishing boom, partly inspired by growing cultural confidence and a burgeoning New Zealand music scene. Magazines like *Loop*, though not limiting themselves to Wellington, had a distinctively capital feel, thanks in part to their championing of local bands including Fat Freddy’s Drop and the Black Seeds. Meanwhile, art magazine *White Fungus*, which has since emigrated to Taiwan along with its founders, brothers Ron and Mark Hanson, launched itself in spectacular style in 2004. Copies of the magazine, which attacked then Mayor Kerry Prendergast’s business ties (she called the story “lies and innuendo”), were covered in Christmas wrapping paper and hurled through the doors of Wellington shops.

Staple magazine, launched in 2003, was a reflection of growing confidence and interest in New Zealand culture. It was, as journalist Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins put it, “of interest to anyone keen to know what was happening in the cultural space between the moment in which you first discover the streets and the moment in which you finally settle for suburbia”. Less painfully hip than Auckland’s *Pavement*, it

was devoted to showcasing the many weird and wonderful aspects of New Zealand. “Other local magazines at the time were like pin-ups on a teenager’s wall,” says *Staple* editor Cass Hesom-Williams. “We wanted to be a mirror.”

A fair amount of *Staple’s* content, at least in the first issues, revolved around Wellington artists and people (the Phoenix Foundation featured in both the first and last issues), though the focus was always broader. Anyone doing something interesting was up for inclusion, be they artists, musicians or, in one delightful case, a man who had spent several decades collecting and creating garden gnomes.

Producing *Staple* was, Hesom-Williams says, “a lot of work. Magazine publishing is a bit of a Sisyphean task – you get an issue to print and think, ‘Phew!’ for one second, then you’re right back into it, creating the next one... Fortunately we were all quite young and naive, otherwise we probably would never have done it.” Sadly, *Staple* survived for just ten issues before succumbing to the problems that bedevil many small

businesses: not enough capital, and not enough long-term planning. As *Loop* founder Mark Cubey put it in 2001, “Unless you are going for mainstream, it is difficult to make money in a market as small as New Zealand.” That said, the company behind *Staple*, First Floor Publishing, does successfully run two magazines for specific audiences, the skateboarding magazine *Manual* and the trail-biking magazine *Spoke*.

But even the *Wellington Guide*, a soft-focus, advertorial-heavy glossy, ceased publication last year; its website no longer works and former staff aren’t returning calls. So it’s a bold person who launches a magazine in Wellington – and, even if they appear to be defying the odds, the risk of hubris is ever present. In *Wellington City Magazine’s* spring 1987 issue, John Saker’s successor, Malcolm McSparran, responded to one of the magazine’s critics with the riposte: “Incidentally, my readership is booming.”

It was the magazine’s last issue.

STILL SALIENT AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

Undoubtedly the capital’s longest-running magazine is the student rag *Salient*, published weekly in term time every year since it was founded by A.H. ‘Bonk’ Scotney in 1938. Where other student papers seek controversy for its own sake – as with *Canta’s* notorious Holocaust parody ‘The Importance of Being Furnaced’ – *Salient* has often taken a more highbrow tone, concentrating on the arts or politics, or both.

Current *Salient* co-editor Ollie Neas joins a list of past editors that includes arts mover and shaker Mark Cubey, former PM Geoffrey Palmer, Wellington QC Hugh Rennie, and, in the interests of full disclosure, this writer. Neas says he relishes “the opportunity to each week put out

something, a magazine, that [we] have complete freedom over... Our mandate is really to put anything and everything in there.”

As we speak, the latest *Salient* is being published, complete with a penis on the cover, “superimposed over a picture of a lady,” Neas says cheerfully. “We wanted to get people thinking about gender.”

There are other student magazines. Across town, Massey students used to read *Magneto*, now replaced this year by *Massive*, a publication covering all the Massey campuses. Other student journals at Victoria have also come and gone: in the 1990s, law students started up the aptly named and short-lived *Lemon*, while the early 2000s saw a rival to *Salient* called *Lucid*. But only *Salient* endures at Victoria.