

## The Private Press in New Zealand in the Twenty-first Century

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In the pre-computer age, one way of getting your views disseminated was to print them yourself: a prospect that is rather more challenging than operating a computer today. Many of these printers would have regarded themselves as small publishers, and the private-press “ideals” of today would not have occurred to them. How, then, do we distinguish the “private press” from the “small publisher”? Though the private press has always been based on letterpress technology, some printers have moved with changes in printing technology and installed small offset presses or, today, laser printers. In recent years one or two New Zealand private presses have used automatic letterpress machines and still work in a non-commercial capacity.

Jürgen Wegner, the Brandywine Press archivist, comments that New Zealand has produced a surprising number of private presses over the past century. A search of library holdings reveals a large scale of press output, ranging from a small number of books of some design and production merit through to a large number of ephemeral items of dubious merit. There does now seem to be a paucity of presses operating at the top end, with rather more producing work with the unmistakable “hand printed by an enthusiastic amateur” look: over- and under-inking, worn type, bad impression, dubious typography.

Wegner would have based his observation on the listings, and contributions, of the Association of Handcraft Printers (NZ) Inc. Nearly all New Zealand private presses have had a connection, at some point, with the AHP, the aims of which are to promote the preservation of (letterpress) print technology, knowledge and practice. Most AHP members are amateurs and spare-time dabblers who like getting their hands dirty and seeing the results of a manually-produced image in this computer age. AHP caters for these dabblers, some of whose presses may be only a tabletop Adana and a couple of fonts of type, or whose press may exist in name only. They all have their place in the AHP.

The “surprising number” of presses noted by Wegner are evident today. AHP’s 2007 membership list of 86 members includes 22 presses (whose names reflect their non-commercial nature). These are:

Nag’s Head Press, Christchurch; Frayed Frisket Press, Dunedin; Drolleries Press, Christchurch; Homeprint, Feilding; Maungatiro Press, Marton; Fernbank Studio, Wellington; Aspect Press, Levin; Hand-in-Hand press, Wellington; Silent Isle Press, Wellington; Heathward Press, Lower Hutt; Graft Topsail, Auckland; Puriri Press, Auckland; Driving Creek Press, Coromandel; Sedang Press, Auckland; Emtio Press, Auckland; Pyramid Press, Auckland; Pear Tree Press, Auckland; Toad Hall

Press, Auckland; Green Leaf Press, Kerikeri; Brookfield Press Auckland; Wordsell Press, Auckland.

If we trawl through memberships and compilations of work back as far as 1975, the list of presses and the diversity of names mount. We have:

Little Dolphin Press; Copperbeech Press; Sign of the Cuckold Horn; Foulhouse Press; Imp Press; Ark Press; The Peripatetic Palm; Kauri Press; Millwood Owl Private Press; Studio Press; Broken Gun Press; Pebble Press; Dingle Press; Asquith Press; Pilliwinks Press [NB: a pilliwinks is an instrument of torture for squeezing the fingers]; Tuatara Press; Elibank Press; Broadoak Press; Potty Press; Cock & Bull Press; Handprint Press; Ocean in Motion; Cougar Press.

The Letterpress News website ([letterpressnz.wordpress.com](http://letterpressnz.wordpress.com)), maintained by AHP member Lawrence Roberts of Christchurch, also lists Private Presses, as well as events, news and items for sale. The private press listings should, however, be seen in a historical context as the majority are no longer operating.

All of the presses mentioned above seem to have been letterpress based, though some existed only for short periods of time with minimum equipment and minimum output. Other presses were significant producers of books and ephemera. Phil Parr of Aspect Press and Walter Lemm of Imp Press, who were instrumental in establishing the AHP, produced a large and varied selection of printed matter. In the past ten years, some of the above presses that have come to an end include Lemm's Imp Press, Mark Venable's Mt St John Press, Ron Holloway's Griffin Press, Warwick Jordan's Hard Echo Press and Charles Alldritt, who for years printed from his basement but never gave himself a press name.

Though not falling into the category of private presses, mention should be made of three museums that house significant letterpress collections: The Bedplate Press Printing Museum in Upper Hutt, has working and historical displays of letterpress print equipment; MOTAT (the Museum of Transport and Technology) in Auckland, has a print section operated by volunteers, who are AHP members; and Ferrymead Printing Society Inc., a division of Ferrymead Heritage Park, Christchurch, has working displays of printing presses.



It is useful to distinguish the amateur crafts person from the printer who strives for the next level. A quote that influenced me some years ago is from Alan Loney, now an Australian resident. He wrote "One chooses either to simply muck about in the shed with an old printing press, or to acquire at considerable cost and some risk to one's emotional stability, standards of excellence comparable with the finest anywhere in the world." This suggests the gap separating the hobby printer and the private press printer who immerses him/herself in all aspects of fine print.

The three university presses that operate today are concerned with quality printing and more serious content. The Holloway Press at University of Auckland is ad-

ministered through the English Department <<http://www.hollowaypress.auckland.ac.nz/index.htm>>. It produces exclusive artist and writer limited editions. In 2005, for example, the press issued *Searchings*, a book that incorporated original images by New Zealand, but US-based, artist Max Gimblett. The 80 copies of this book sold for NZ\$1200 per copy: a profitable commercial venture from a press still operating on traditional letterpress values. Binding work for the Holloway Press is outsourced commercially, which seems not uncommon for private presses generally. Holloway Press purchased Linotype mats of 12 & 14 point Janson which, although set by the remaining commercial trade setter, is reserved for the Press's exclusive use. This gives the Press the capability of producing books of substantial size. The Press operates an Asbern cylinder and a Columbian flat-bed press.

Wai-te-ata Press at Victoria University of Wellington has New Zealand's best located press room, with sweeping views of Wellington city <<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/wtappress/>>. The Press is very well equipped, having a Stanhope, three Albions and a Vandercook cylinder press, as well as a large repository of type and equipment. Wai-te-ata functions mainly as a teaching press and in February this year hosted the print section of the Australasian Rare Books Summer School.

Otakou Press (the re-branded Bibliography Room Press) is operated through Special Collections at University of Otago Library. In 2003 it instigated an annual five-week printer-in-residence programme, to raise awareness of the press. The Press produces books and ephemera and conducts student workshops and demonstrations. Along with a Columbian, an Albion and a Vandercook cylinder press, Otakou houses an etching press, which enables artist print-makers to collaborate with letterpress printers.

With the withdrawal of Alan Loney and his Hawk Press there are now few presses in New Zealand producing work at a fine-print level apart from the three university presses. My own press, the Pear Tree Press in Auckland, has achieved some recognition for its quality and innovation. John Denny's Puriri Press in Auckland, which produced a number of excellent quality books, has sadly moved from letterpress into digital. John has traded his Linotype for computer. Homeprint, in Feilding, run by John and Allison Brebner, works mainly as a teaching press and has impressive workshop facilities. It specialises in letterpress, relief printing, and associated crafts catering to students. Brendan O'Brien's Fernbank Studio in Wellington and John Holmes's Frayed Frisket Press in Dunedin both produce small works of some merit. The Nag's Head Press in Christchurch, operated by Bob Gormack since the 1940s, has produced over one hundred small, excellently printed and bound books on a range of topics. It still survives, into a second generation.



As I was struggling one day up the steps to the Holloway Press, carrying trays of heavy Linotype metal, a student asked me what was the purpose of such material and its function. When I explained, he expressed amazement at the physical effort

required to achieve the same end-result that could be produced with a compact disk that could be slipped into his pocket. Why on earth would anyone want to go to all that effort? He went away shaking his head. The accumulation and housing of obsolete, heavy—and generally dirty—equipment versus the omnipotent computer!

For the continuation of the higher standards for the private press in New Zealand we may have to look to the universities and colleges to foster the book arts and create and maintain an interest in the “obsolete” technology of printing, in the history and achievements in typography, in book production and—above all—in the production of something by hand, using a process that one has control over, and understanding of, from start to finish.

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