

JUNE TORCASIO

Two Melbourne countercultural bookshops: Source Books from America and Whole Earth Bookstore

Source Books from America (known as The Source) and Whole Earth Bookstore (known as Whole Earth) opened in Melbourne in 1969 and 1973 respectively. Their young, idealistic proprietors reflected the interests and aspirations of a burgeoning youth culture in their choice of stock. There are no surviving business archives for either of the bookshops. The following account is based on interviews with the former owners,¹ information about their book stock and operations in their publications – *Whole Earth Review* and *Source Review*² – and relevant newspaper articles and other publications.³

The 1960s saw significant social changes in Australia, largely as a result of the post-war baby boom and the immigration program. There was a growing population with a heavy concentration of young people. Political dissent, youthful rebellion, permissiveness, anti-authoritarian attitudes, self-fulfilment, individualism, sexual freedom, generational conflict, a pop culture, low unemployment and the possibility of full secondary and tertiary education in the new higher education institutions were characteristic of the decade.⁴ Opposition to Australia's involvement in the war in Vietnam was expressed in moratoriums during 1970–71.⁵ Women's liberation, government grants for Australian writers and publishers, the environmental movement, opposition to uranium mining, gay liberation, land rights, anti-apartheid movements, different styles of education (such as community

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WHOLE EARTH REVIEW
NUMBER
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schools and open classrooms) and free tertiary education were also features of the 1970s to which both bookshops responded.⁶

The American visionary Buckminster Fuller and his concept 'Spaceship Earth' led to the publication in 1968 of *Whole Earth Catalog*, which was by 1971 the biggest seller at The Source.⁷ It was an American counterculture magazine and product catalogue published by Stewart Brand between 1968 and 1972 and evaluated easily accessible information tools for survival. The back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s particularly influenced the ethos of the bookshop Whole Earth. It also led to the publication in 1972 of the innovative and still surviving Australian magazine *Earth Garden*, which focused on sustainable living, natural lifestyles, self-sufficiency, growing food and the inner changes achieved by living in tune with nature. Whole Earth aligned with this movement in its choice of name and the collections it held.

In October 1969, Paul and Ann Smith, with business partner Alex Morton, rented space upstairs at 121 Collins Street, Melbourne, for their first business venture, The Source. It was, as journalist Patrick Smith described, 'at the top of a flight of steep, creaky stairs at the end of a narrow corridor'.⁸ Readers were keen to access American paperbacks, and this was initially the *raison d'être* of The Source. The shop imported all of its books directly from the United States using American distributors and in January 1971 received three tonnes of paperbacks.⁹ This was a unique response to a book supply problem in Australia, which was at the time dominated by a British publishing monopoly. Journalist John Larkin described a hunger for 'books about now', which The Source was addressing.¹⁰ Paul took advantage of a 'fly now, pay later' offer and went to Berkeley, California, where he visited Bookpeople, an employee-owned and -operated book wholesaler and distributor established in 1969. They were socialists and hippies, distributors of alternative and countercultural material and astrological charts. Paul selected many books there, taking advantage of the current favourable exchange rate. His next stop was at ANA, a vast book warehouse in Boston, Massachusetts.

A dock strike in Melbourne delayed The Source's planned Christmas sale until January 1970. The newly imported books filled the shop. Signs attracted long queues of customers. Thousands of books were sold in one day, and The Source soon began air-freighting books from the United States. Patrick Smith noted in June 1970 that several big publishers disapproved of this 'and threatened to get at their suppliers in America'.¹¹ The threats obviously lacked substance, for nothing happened.

Who were these young booksellers who dared to buck the system? Paul Smith, originally from Melbourne, was 16 when he left school – St Bede’s College in Mentone – for Sydney, in 1962. There he became a ward assistant in a mental hospital. He returned to Melbourne in 1966 with his partner Ann, a paediatric nurse, to work for Dr Andrew Fabinyi at Cheshire’s basement bookshop in Little Collins Street (later to become the Goesunder Flea Market).¹² After the mandatory six months’ staff training, he was allowed to order titles for himself at generous staff discount rates. He nurtured his lifelong interest in the 14th century Persian mystic Hafiz, a master of the ghazal, an amatory poem or ode. Much later, in 1986, Paul published, via New Humanity Books, a two-volume modern translation of *The Divan of Hafiz*. When Cheshire’s was bought out by Paul Hamlyn, experienced staff resigned, and Paul Smith managed the bookshop during 1968–69. He recalled customer rage and staff embarrassment when Hamlyn’s new computer (the first system used in an Australian bookstore) reversed the credits and debits.

Paul soon realised that Cheshire’s, in common with all other Australian bookshops, could not obtain the latest American publications quickly. As he explained to journalist John Larkin at the time, books from America were subjected to rights with British publishers, and it took six months for them to decide to publish in America and further delays before a hardcover book was published as a paperback. This made an 18-month wait before Australian bookshops could buy an American paperback. This was due to the British Publishers’ Traditional Market Agreement, which guaranteed British publishers privileged access over American publishers to the Australian market. The agreement ended in 1975 following a court decision, when American publishers brought an anti-trust case against British publishers supporting the agreement in the United States. Australian publishers could finally access rights for local editions of many American titles formerly locked into agreements with British publishers.

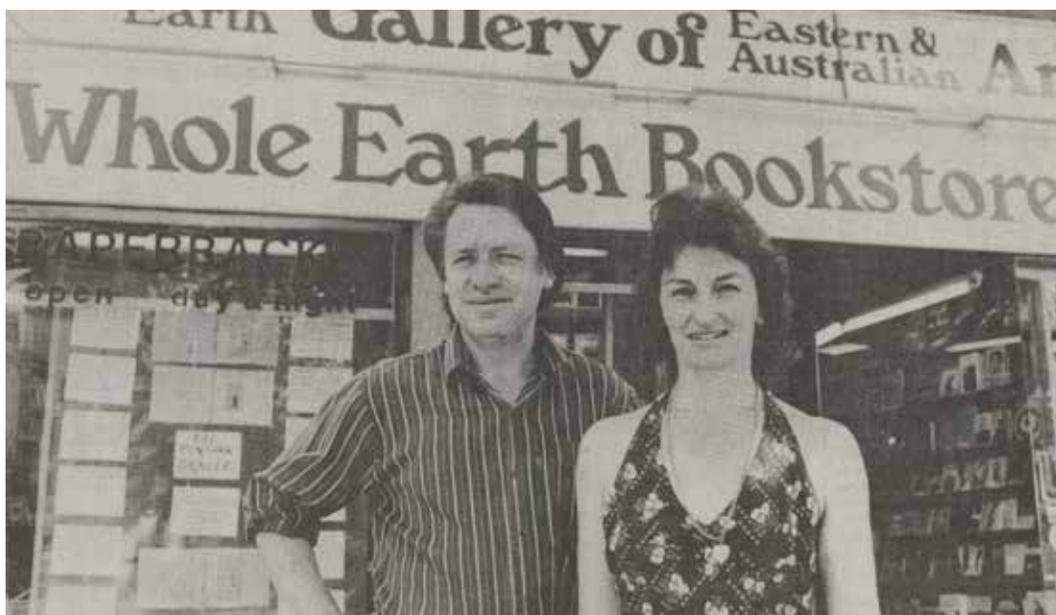
Alex Morton was brought up on a farm at Gooram, near Euroa, in northeastern Victoria. After Gooram State School he attended Euroa High School, then Melbourne Grammar. He worked on the family farm for a year or so before his first job in the ‘big smoke’, in 1967, in the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s mailroom in Lonsdale Street, Melbourne. Soon he became a studio hand with the commission at Ripponlea, regularly opening the door in the Magic Faraway Tree on the program *Adventure Island*. Alex was with the commission until 1969. He met Paul and Ann through friends employed at Cheshire’s. Capital from the sale of his BHP shares paid for the rental of the upstairs space at 121 Collins Street. The 1968

long-playing album *Source*, by his folksinger friend Doug Ashdown, was the inspiration for the name of the new bookshop.

Between 1969 and 1971, The Source went beyond the supply of American paperbacks.¹³ It fulfilled customer orders for the works of Leonard Cohen, Lenny Bruce, Ken Kesey, Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, Tom Wolfe and JRR Tolkien. Also stocked were books on ecology, Native American life, communication, science fantasy, the Baha'i faith and works by Henry Miller and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The Source sold poetry published by Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookstore, in Columbus Avenue, San Francisco, California, which was founded in 1953. Poets included Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso. Later, underground comics by American authors Gilbert Shelton and Robert Crumb became available. A good working relationship between Alex and Vin Darroch, a broad-minded Scottish customs censorship inspector, reduced the likelihood of raids by customs officers.

Early in 1971, Alex published the first issue of a proposed bimonthly catalogue, *Source Review*.¹⁴ With some colour illustrations, it included a basic stock list and reviews of books on ecology, food, health and growing plants. Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1968) and JH Willis's *Victorian Toadstools and Mushrooms* (1963, 3rd edition reprint) were reviewed. The front and back covers of *Source Review* featured the staff of The Source and those involved in its publishing activities. Paul, Ann, Alex and the poet Charles Buckmaster worked in the bookshop. Rienie and Judith Van Dinteren owned a printing press and based themselves in a room above the bookshop, also doing outside printing jobs. They printed *Source Review* and, later in 1972, the first issues of the magazine *Earth Garden*, edited by Keith and Irene Smith (no relation to Paul). The second issue of *Source Review*, in a larger, A4 format and without colour printing, followed a similar pattern, with the catalogue listing a wide variety of subject areas: 'alternatives, art, black studies, drama, ecology, environment, nature, education, fantasy and science fiction, film, fiction, food, literature, music, philosophy, poetry, politics, psychology, religion and mysticism, sociology and anthropology'. The Source also stocked imported underground newspapers.

Paul decided to publish a newspaper himself. In 1970, John Larkin (also a columnist for *The Age*), Paul and Ann, other journalists and writers, a boilermaker and a university dropout prepared to publish the newspaper on the floor above the shop. The omens may have been unfavourable, for the floor was said to be haunted – a doctor had examined Ned Kelly there before he was executed! Paul had enlisted talented people to contribute to



Paul and Ann Smith in front of their Whole Earth Bookstore in 1986. *The Age*, 22 February 1986, p. 18. Reproduced courtesy of *The Age*

this venture, which was financially separate from the bookselling activities. A folded spreadsheet inside *Source Review* announced plans for *Source* newspaper and invited readers to submit contributions.

Then followed the first and only issue of *Source* newspaper. Dubbed by its producers as 'a two-way communications medium', it was 32 pages, folio size and illustrated. It included book reviews and introduced contemporary issues – refugees from east Pakistan to West Bengal, genocide in Dacca, the dangers of poisoning termites, cybernetic guerilla warfare, baby slings, hand-spinning, ecology, cars as pollutants, the Fletcher Jones workplace, the Redfern All Blacks versus South Africa, David Williamson's play *Don's party*, the occult, worker power in Yugoslavia and free schools.

An illustration of a pie drew attention to the anticipated costs: distributor and newsagent, typesetter, printer, office rent, phone, art supplies, wages and so on. Subscriptions priced at up to \$100 were encouraged to defray costs, as were creative contributions from readers. About 15 people had worked on the *Source* newspaper, and everyone had promised to contribute towards publication costs. The money was not forthcoming and the Smiths were in financial difficulties. Ann had begun a career as a paediatric nurse, and her regular salary supported them during those hard times. They had to sell their home in Eltham. Alex bought their share of the bookshop and ran it until its closure, in 1982. In 2007, Alex recalled the way things were. The *Source* was a collective with friends and a number of 'hangers-on'. Financial arrangements were very informal. 'We were a bunch of hippies',

he said. Money from the bookstore till had gone into the newspaper until he asserted that he was running the bookshop and Paul and his team were publishing the newspaper.

Alex's tenure at 121 Collins Street was dramatic. There was a deliberate attempt to burn the bookshop by neo-Nazi Willem Nyhuis.¹⁵ In May 1972, he set fire to four Melbourne buildings, including The Source, in response to an alleged attack and burning, about three weeks before, of the National Socialist Party bookshop in Nicholson Street, Carlton, by left-wing supporters.¹⁶ Fortunately, the petrol poured under the front door of The Source only burned out a few floorboards.

An even more explosive incident forced the removal of The Source to new premises.¹⁷ On 13 July 1972, a lift charged by a build-up of leaking gas exploded out of the Austral Building and fell through the roof of, and into, the hairdressing salon below. The Austral Building, at 115–119 Collins Street, was next door to The Source. Two of Alex's staff, hearing the bang and feeling the building shudder, escaped injury by grasping some bookshelves just before the second floor collapsed into the back of a restaurant. The other two staff members in the bookshop at the time, Graeme Smith and Kate Veitch, were helped out through a jemmied window at the rear, while a customer clung to the front door until rescued by a fireman. Firemen estimated the total damage at more than \$100,000, and by all accounts the blast blew out two walls and caved in the bookshop ceiling and floor.¹⁸ It was just as well that The Source was insured.

For a few months afterwards, The Source occupied less space, in a room upstairs in the Metropole Arcade, before moving to 4 Manchester Lane (off Collins Street), where it remained until 1978. Robert Rooney was employed at The Source in Manchester Lane from 1973 to 1978. As well as being an artist and art critic, he had a knowledge of bookselling, children's literature, photography and art that enabled Alex to enrich the stock. Rooney was interested in Japanese literature, and his American publishing contacts with art galleries were invaluable.

The move to Manchester Lane was fortuitous. Archie & Jugheads Records, which David Pepperell and Keith Glass had opened in 1971 in the Metropole Arcade, moved next door to The Source in 1972. They remained there until 1978. Alex noted that it was a good match having the stores side by side. The record store also imported a lot of stock from America, and each helped increase the other's customer base.

In 1974, Tom and Wendy Whitton, in *Inside Melbourne's Bookshops*, described The Source at 4 Manchester Lane.¹⁹ There was a staff of three,

and the bookshop hours were 10 am to 6 pm from Monday to Friday and 10.30 am to 12.30 pm on Saturday. Specialisations were alternative literature, education, ecology, rock music, art, film, occult, religion, Native American culture, adult fantasy, science fiction and fairy tales, and periodicals such as *Mother Earth News*, *Cosmos*, *Grass Roots* and *Earth Garden*. Posters and Native American implements complemented the books displayed. Many of the new and unusual American titles were not available anywhere else in Australia. The shop also stocked the works of American fiction writers such as Jim Harrison and Thomas McGuane. Revisiting the shop at the same location in 1977, the Whittons noted only two staff, yet the working hours had increased, with 9 pm closing on Friday. Art and photography were a prime focus of the collection. 'One of the pioneers in the importation of American books', the shop seemed less radical in view of established competition.²⁰

From 1978 to 1980, the Universal Workshop in Fitzroy, with its live theatre and music activities, was home for The Source, but there was a lack of structure and basic ground rules – obstacles to good business. Rent increases then forced a move to 593 Chapel Street, South Yarra. Alex and his wife, Helen, worked hard to keep the business afloat, with Alex taking on after-hours work next door at the South Yarra Arms.

The Source closed in 1982. Alex, at the helm of the bookshop, had revelled in the freedom to do his own thing, to widen the scope of the collection and to run a leaner and more businesslike enterprise. His next venture was to set up video libraries in video stores. He then worked with Dixons, a secondhand record shop, for seven years. A strong interest in guitar, mandolin and banjo music led him to sell records at record fairs. In 1993, he established a business selling new and secondhand recorded music in his specialist shop, The Last Record Store, at 304 Smith Street, Collingwood. He stocked Indigenous Australian, folk, world, acoustic, local independent and roots-based music. In May 2011, The Last Record Store closed, and since then, Alex has returned to playing banjo, mandolin and guitar, and reviews popular music.

Turning back to 1971, and the departure of Paul and Ann Smith from The Source: what did they do next? At that time there were millions of refugees from Pakistan starving in Bangladesh. It had been the largest mass migration in recorded history. Paul, Ann and Steve Rooney began a hunger fast on the Melbourne General Post Office steps. According to the Reverend Dr Sir Irving Benson, the 'attractive' Smiths, with Indonesian writer Paul Poernomo, sat alongside collection boxes. Benson made his contribution and

‘came away deeply stirred’. He entreated Australians to donate money for Bangladesh.²¹ Rooney, who had the original idea for the fast, was prepared to starve until he dropped unless the Australian federal government gave \$10 million in aid to India and Pakistan – it had only given \$1.15 million during the preceding year.²² The appeal ended on 1 October when the federal police arrested six fasters. The fasters had raised about \$20,000.²³

The Smiths moved to Silvan, then to Eltham, where they distributed underground publications through their *Seekers Catalogue*. In 1973, they rented a shop at 81 Bourke Street, opposite Pellegrini’s, calling it the Whole Earth Bookstore (referred to here as Whole Earth), and beginning a family business which was to last for 17 years. Paul, Ann and Eileen Smith (Paul’s mother, known as Ann Sr) were partners in the business. Kevin Smith (Paul’s brother) was a partner from 1973 to 1975. They established another Whole Earth in Lonsdale Street, which traded for several years. In Bourke Street, the record shop next door became vacant and the Smiths were able to double the size of Whole Earth.

They produced the *Whole Earth Sun Moon Review* in 1973. It continued until 1977 as the *Whole Earth Review* or occasional variant titles, such as the *Whole Earth Bookstore Review and Catalogue*. Each issue included topical lists of books held by Whole Earth, book reviews and intricate illustrations. Ann recalled that the circulation figures for the *Review* were only a few hundred per issue.

In 1974, Paul edited and published the *Pie Anthology*, a 628-page collection of underground poetry, literature, paintings and drawings by young Australians.²⁴ A grant from the federal government made the publication possible, and many of the writers and artists later became well known. They included Charles Buckmaster, Michael Dugan, Mal Morgan, John Tranter, Mirka Mora and Phillip Motherwell. Paul’s publishing venture, under the imprint of New Humanity Books, continued until 1992.

In the early 1970s, acquiring American titles quickly remained a problem, and, as Paul recounted, Whole Earth was selling the three-volume American Ballantine Books edition of JRR Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (with Tolkien’s appendices) at half the cost of the British edition. An Allen & Unwin representative threatened to take them to court if they continued selling the Ballantine set. When the Smiths reported their problem to Ballantine, the publisher assured them that they would pay any ensuing legal fees. There was an out-of-court settlement of \$3000. Ballantine reneged on their promise to pay, saying that they had never heard of the Smiths, and then wrote and demanded the return of the books supplied to Whole Earth. Paul replied saying, ‘We don’t exist’, which was the end of the matter.



Staff at The Source bookshop, from *Source Review* no. 1 (early 1971). Left to right: Judith Van Dinteren, Rienie Van Dinteren, Memory Holloway, and a friend of the staff, Fran Whitlock, Alex Morton, David Matthews, Charles Buckmaster, Ann Smith, Paul Smith. Private collection. Reproduced courtesy of Alex Morton

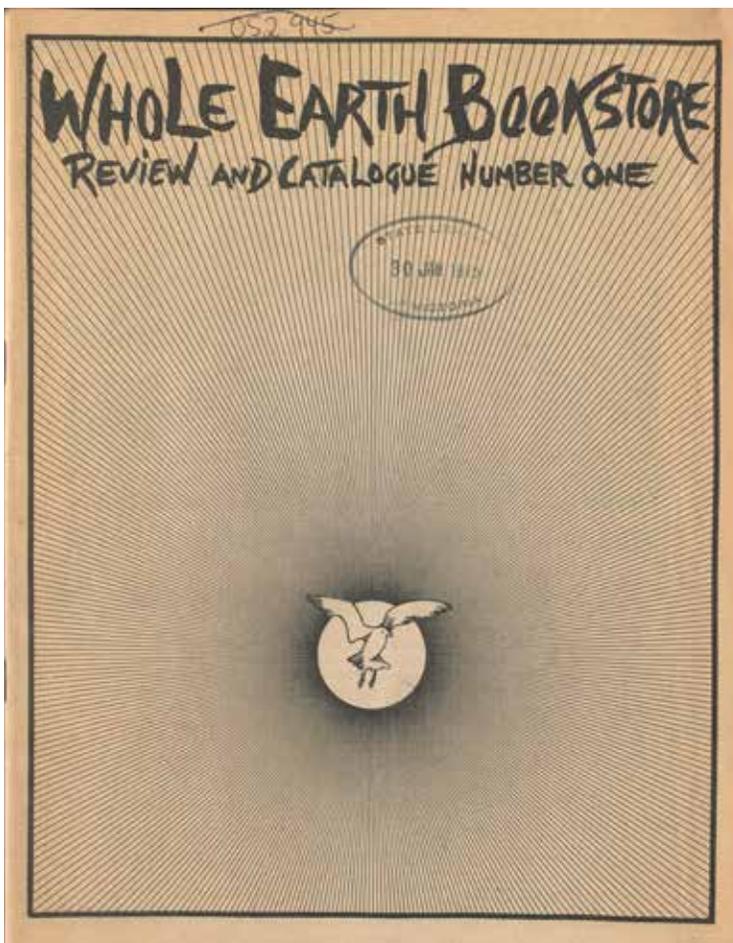


The Whole Earth Bookstore closing-down sale, June 1999. Photograph by June Torcasio. Reproduced with permission

The Whittons, in their review of Melbourne bookshops, noted the Whole Earth in 1974 as 'yet another excellent counterculture, alternative bookshop ... [with] simple wooden shelves, clear signs, and a comfortable chair'. Staff were 'helpful' and the stock 'wide-ranging', including 'ways of life, crafts, building, art, fiction, fantasy and science fiction, kids, society, religion, mysticism, occult, poetry, health, psychology, ecology, film, food, music, and theatre' and American imports and magazines. Six staff provided a service from 9.30 am to 11.30 pm, Monday to Saturday.²⁵ In the 1977 edition of *Inside Melbourne Bookshops*, it was noted that five staff worked in a shop twice its original size, that Whole Earth was open on Sundays and that the range of books had improved. There were 'sections devoted to art, poetry, fiction, ways of life, framing and gardening, health and cookery, mysticism, psychology and music'. Local authors were especially featured, and 'other well-covered subjects [included] crafts and building, alternative energy, politics, feminism, film, science-fiction and travel'.²⁶ In 1988, *Bookshops of Victoria* noted the aim of Whole Earth was 'to stock titles that will change people, help them to evolve into more conscious human beings'. The shop also held 'a collection of paintings from Tibet, India, Persia, China and the best of Australian artists'.²⁷

Whole Earth remained at 81–83 Bourke Street until 1992, part of the café society and Pellegrini's, and opposite the Hill of Content and the Paperback Bookshop. The business thrived on a selection of literary and alternative titles. In 1990, after 17 years of ownership, the Smiths sold to business partners Jenny Talbot and Norm Stephen. Jenny, an artist, conservationist and writer, was involved in causes, and her interests (yoga, Tibetan Buddhism, Jungian psychology and Indian classical dance) were reflected in her book stock. Norm was a retired chartered accountant. A long-term bookseller with the store since 1985, Geraldine Starbrook, had a thorough knowledge of publishers, distribution and the book world, her career having begun with Robertson & Mullens in Elizabeth Street in 1972. Ann Smith continued to manage the shop at 81–83 Bourke Street until 1992, when the new owners decided to move the business to 246 Swanston Walk.

Bookshops of Victoria reviewed the shop in 1998. Opening hours were no longer late into the night: 9.30 am to 6 pm from Monday to Thursday, 9.30 am to 8 pm on Friday, 11 am to 5 pm on Saturday and 12.45 pm to 5 pm on Sunday. The range had narrowed, and the store specialised in psychology, self-help, health, meditation, religion, gardening, fiction, philosophy, science and cookery. According to the reviewers, 'Real subject strengths [included] psychology, self-help, healing [and] Buddhism (especially Tibetan)', and the



Whole Earth Bookstore Review and Catalogue, no. 1, 1973, cover. SLT 052.945 W62

cookery section and extensive fiction stock were particularly noteworthy.²⁸ Swanston Walk held the promise of developing into another Lygon Street, but didn't. Initially, shopkeepers endured the dust and noise of road works, and book sales reduced by \$200 per day. The street, deserted after dark except for the destitute and heroin addicts, made late opening hours dangerous. Geraldine believed that the move had sealed Whole Earth's fate. However, it was not the new location alone which adversely affected sales, through the loss of the Bourke Street customers. The collection was smaller and more specialised, emphasising the countercultural. It could not attract the volume of sales required to make it viable. The range of subjects stocked at Swanston Walk in 1999 included astrology, Chinese medicine, Buddhism, ecology, permaculture, psychology, spirituality, Shamanic traditions, aromatherapy, Satanism, Indigenous Australian writing, self-help, healing and economics.

Whole Earth closed down on 30 June 1999, following a month-long sale in which titles sold at a fraction of their recommended retail prices. The

shop had been a magnet for students, teachers, pensioners, the unemployed, 'alternative' people, academics and 'seekers' in their search for meaning, according to Jenny, and had also supplied schools and libraries, turning up elusive titles for busy teachers. Customers had enjoyed a spirit of idealism and social conscience and the lack of pressure to purchase the titles they browsed. They could use the community noticeboard and feel the gaze of the Dalai Lama, whose portrait hung above the shelves.

In 1993, Paul and Ann moved to a quieter lifestyle in the country. In 1994, they bought a property at Campbell's Creek, near Castlemaine, and in 1995 opened another bookshop. Called Smith's Country Bazaar, it was in an old de-licensed hotel at 47 Main Road and held bric-a-brac and a few books. They increased their book stock with the remains from shops which were closing down. Smith's Country Bazaar eventually became Book Heaven. Paul and Ann now savour the broader freedom of the retrospective.

A comparison of the *Whole Earth Review* and the *Source Review*, the catalogues of the bookshops, shows that each stocked the following subject areas in the early 1970s: art, drama, ecology, environment, nature, education, fantasy, science fiction, film, fiction, literature, music, poetry, psychology, religion and mysticism. The Source also kept titles about 'alternatives: the new consciousness', black studies, philosophy, politics and sociology and anthropology. However, Whole Earth additionally offered books about health, ways of life, society, craft and building, cookery, children's books, gardening, education and the occult. By 1976, Whole Earth held a larger range of books, listing many additional subject areas in its catalogue. It advertised photography, hobbies and leisure, society and economics, health and childcare, education, travel, philosophy, yoga, myth and prophecy, oracles, drugs, food, feminism, economics, farming, natural power, 'communal', and building and power. And, as the Whittons observed, it also supported local authors.²⁹

The legacy of Alex Morton and Paul and Ann Smith was the timely provision of books from America. Alex presented an impressively wide range of quality stock in a comparatively small space, particularly after the forced move from Collins Street in 1972. He developed collections in art, eastern philosophies and alternative cultures, including Native American. Paul and Ann, in a larger space, consistently focused on sustainable living, keeping a wide range of literature as well. Both The Source and Whole Earth offered their reading public a unique range of alternative literature, from the practical to the esoteric. Those old enough to remember them do so with affection.