

'Harken to thee, faithful ones'

By Robert Thomas

There were some interesting sales in the Australian comic book market on eBay last year.

A frenzied bidding war resulted in the record sales of the following comic books:

- *Amazing Spider-Man* #1, \$360
- *Fantastic Four* #1, \$204
- *X-Men* #1, \$204
- *Incredible Hulk* #1, \$202
- *Silver Surfer* #1, \$112.00

The *Comic Buyer's Guide* currently values a near mint copy of *Amazing Spider-Man* #1 at \$US20,000, so why is \$A360.00 considered a record?

More like a bargain price surely? That would be true if referring to the original Marvel version from the United States.

However this version is the Australian comic reprint. \$360 for a 30c black-and-white reprint? A 1200-fold price increase on something produced on the cheap by a comic company that lasted little over a year? A more recent listing on eBay saw *Fantastic Four* #1 for auction with an asking price of \$800! So what's the story here?

Genius

The story begins with the Perth-born journalist and newspaper entrepreneur Maxwell Newton and the company in question was Newton Comics, which during 1975 - 1976 was licensed to reprint Marvel Comics for the Australian market.

Maxwell Newton (1929-1990) has been described as brilliant, complex, creative, driven, gifted, a genius, excessive, extreme, erratic, passionate, unorthodox and, sadly, ultimately self-destructive.

He made friends and enemies, po-



larising both in equal measure by their loyalty or loathing of him. At the heights of his career he rubbed shoulders with politicians and Prime Ministers, captured the attention of thousands of readers through his newspapers, fought the establishments of the newspaper industry and commanded the respect of his peers with his influential economic and political columns.

By contrast, the depths of his career were equally extreme. While constantly battling the life-long demons of booze and prescription drugs, he would endure bankruptcy, accusations of espionage and police raids on his offices.

He also briefly boasted the largest brothel and pornographic publishing house Melbourne had ever seen prior to his self-imposed exile to the US in the 1980s.

Maxwell Newton's hectic career began in relatively quieter circum-

This week is the 34th birthday of the *Melbourne Observer*. The newspaper was re-launched on September 18 last year. The *Observer* was founded in 1969 by Gordon Barton, but its most colourful owner was Maxwell Newton.

Part of the 'empire' was a comic publishing enterprise, whose products make more today as collectables, than they did in the mid-1970s.

stances. A scholarship in 1951 to study economics saw him attend Clare College, Cambridge, UK, where he passed his exams and achieved the award for outstanding economics graduate of the year and was made honorary scholar.

After graduation he secured a job in the Australian Public Service working as a clerk in the Treasury section



● Max Newton: proprietor of Newton Comics



of Australia House in London. In 1954 he was recalled to Australia to work in the Canberra office of the Treasury.

After a year he applied for and obtained a position in the research department of the Bank of New South Wales. Boredom quickly set in and as an outlet for his active mind, Maxwell wrote a series of letters to *The Sydney Morning Herald* on political and economic issues, which brought him to the attention of its editors.

They were impressed enough to contact him and, after an interview where Maxwell bluffed his way into achieving a higher salary, offered him the job of the *Herald's* political correspondent.

Thus began Maxwell's roller-coaster entry into the world of journalism and politics. As an astute writer he would formulate policy and speeches for opposition Labor leaders, 'Doc' Evatt and Arthur Calwell. He was later appointed Managing Editor of the *Financial Review*, building the

readership from 9000 to 20,000 per edition. He left in 1964 to become founding editor for Rupert Murdoch's new national broadsheet, *The Australian*.

He resigned a year later after a dispute with Rupert Murdoch and began self-publishing a profitable newsletter, *Incentive* (dubbed 'Invective' in some journalistic circles), dealing with politics and economic policy.

Gap

In 1970 Maxwell Newton began publishing the *Melbourne Observer*, later renamed the *Sunday Observer*, seizing the opportunity to fill a gap after the previous owner of the paper had closed it down, leaving Melbourne without a Sunday newspaper.

After the first few struggling years he achieved respectable circulation for the *Sunday Observer*, achieving at its height print runs of up to 200,000 a copy.

However, competition reared its head when a rival paper, the *Sunday Press*, began publishing in 1973. Max's newspaper was being printed on "baby presses" (i.e. small suburban company presses) throughout the Melbourne district.

Concerned that the competition may deny him secure printing contracts and facilities for his newspaper, Maxwell bought and took over Regal Press, giving him the capacity to print the *Sunday Observer* on his own.

Maxwell moved his premises to 1 Newton Street (the street name is a coincidence) and heavily upgraded the printing facilities and plant operations of Regal Press, allowing him to publish colour magazines and newsprint.

In a rush of extravagance he hired a 727 jet to import the equipment from Germany.

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CHAPTER 1 BOOKS & COMICS

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Marvel Comics in Australia: a comic book story

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The crowning piece was a giant Roland colour press that cost \$240,000. At the time it was the biggest sheet-fed colour press in Victoria with the capacity to print 20,000 glossy colour covers per hour.

Armed with secure and updated printing facilities Maxwell now had to tackle the problem that many new publishers face when publishing a once-a-week newspaper.

The *Sunday Observer* only saw the presses operating on weekends therefore Maxwell needed to publish something during the week to keep the presses running.

Collapse

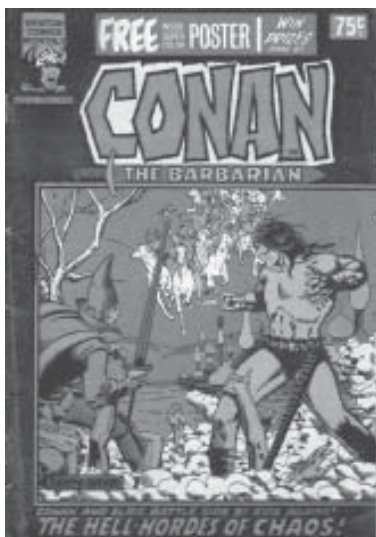
His solution was two-fold: he used the presses to publish soft-core pornography, selling by mail order through his newspaper. He printed and sold such titles as *Bedside Pleasure*, *Eros*, *Colour Sexy Swingers* and *Kings Cross Whisper*.

Such was the success of these magazines that Maxwell would concentrate solely on publishing pornography after the collapse of his newspaper business. (These titles are no doubt collectibles today in some markets but that may be an article for another time!).

His other solution was to publish comic books, which would be cheap to produce, print and distribute.

At a later bankruptcy hearing in 1978 Maxwell noted, "The basic problem we had was to keep our presses going all through the week. These publications were produced for virtually the cost of the newsprint. You can crunch out comics at very low cost using your presses through the week."

The comics industry in Australia at this time was dominated by KG Murray Publishing. Since 1940 when



the federal government enacted an import ban on foreign comics, KG Murray Publishing had been successfully reprinting National Periodical/DC comics from the US for the Australian market in black and white.

These included such titles as *Tip Top*, *Superman Supacomic*, *Wonder Comics*, *Mighty Climax*, *Super Adventure*, *All Favourites* and many others under the Planet Comics and later Murray Comics banner.

Such was the success of Planet Comics that the lifting of the import ban in 1959 had little effect on sales when imports started trickling in.

While the American originals had the novelty of full colour pages, their sales were not helped by the irregular and limited availability of many titles.

The Australian reprints still sold well against their American counterparts, offering better value for money (3 stories and 68 pages for 25c) and reliable publication.

Most kids had no idea they were reading reprints anyway and were happy just to marvel at the exploits of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, the Justice League, the Teen Titans and myriad other heroes with all their wild and imaginative adventures.

Many comic collectors today were introduced to their hobby through the KG Murray range of reprints. Particular interest in these comics has grown over the last decade and they are much sought after items at conventions, collectibles fairs and eBay with price ranges varying from \$5 to \$40 and sometimes higher.

It was in this market that Maxwell Newton would launch his own Newton Comics imprint in 1975, reprinting Marvel Comics. Marvel Comics revolutionized the comic world in 1963 with *The Fantastic Four*, *Spider-Man*, *Avengers* and *X-Men* and other now heroic icons.

Readers identified with the realistic "heroes with problems" approach



adopted by writer Stan Lee and thrilled to the dynamic artistry of comic legends Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, John Romita and others.

Stan Lee, ever the great communicator and salesman, struck a rapport with his readers with his irreverent and firmly tongue-in-cheek Bullpen Bulletins letters page chock-full of hyperbole and hoopla, ushering in the self-proclaimed 'Marvel Age' of comics.

Phenomenon

Marvel became the #1 comic publishing phenomenon of the western world, a position it enjoys to this day.

None of this however held any significance for Maxwell Newton. It was unlikely he even knew what Marvel Comics were besides being a commodity to feed his presses and generate cash. What he did do was employ people who were in the know. One of these people was journalist and wheeler-dealer, Marty Dougherty.

Born in Casino, NSW, Marty Dougherty worked his way up the journalistic ranks starting as a police rounds cadet for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1963.

He worked on *The Australian* and *Sydney Morning Herald* before becoming managing editor of Newton's publishing vehicle, Regal Press.

Tall, affable and easy-going, with an Irish-Australian shrewdness and sociability, he would prove adept at bringing people together and securing deals.

He would later start his own successful public relations consultancy, Dougherty Communications, boasting an impressive clientele including Sir Peter Abeles, Donald Trump, Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer. Dougherty Communications is still operating to this day.

Instrumental

Martin Dougherty was also instrumental in Warwick Fairfax's ill-fated attempted take over of John Fairfax Ltd. in the late 1980's, serving as group managing director for *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

Marty Dougherty always had a general interest in comics from a reader's point of view.

Charged with the responsibility of producing comics for Max Newton's Regal Press, Martin Dougherty traveled to the US and met with Marvel executives and publisher Stan Lee, securing a licence to reprint Marvel comics in Australia.

An initial payment of \$30,000 was made and Marvel released enough black and white proofs to begin printing the first few comics. A try-out run saw print in early 1975 as part of the Watchamacallit Club colour supplement, edited by cartoonist and illustrator, Peter Viska, in the *Sunday Observer*, reprinting Conan, Fantastic Four and Dr Strange.

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Team of 2000 \$10 ea	Accolades \$15ea
Honor roll	\$15 ea
Future Force sign	\$40-\$50 ea
Box Cards \$10 ea	Legend Card \$55

Marvel-lous prices for comics

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After a few weeks an advertisement was placed in the *Sunday Observer* seeking an experienced comic enthusiast to edit the upcoming Newton Comics series.

Responding to the advertisement was 19-year-old Melbourne University engineering student John Cornelle who was looking for a distraction from his studies and got the job.

John was already well-versed in Marvel lore and comics fandom in general and his knowledge would prove valuable to his position as editor. He would remain involved in comic fandom for many years as founding editor for *The Australian Comic Collector* fanzine, and organizing comic conventions.

Cut, paste

John recalls, "The job was one day a week. I pasted together the comics juggling page numbers with the required in-house advertising and trying to keep a reasonable coherence in the story line. However we had a certain amount of material and if we did not have the art for a story we just had to skip it and work around it."

Marty Dougherty was keen to emulate the up-beat Marvel style bulletin and letters pages and so John Cornelle became 'Gentle John', the editor and respondent for the Marvel Mailbag letters page. John recalls, "The name 'Gentle John' was coined by Marty. I still cringe when I hear it!"

The letters published in the comics were a mixture of real and fake with some being lifted directly from the US Marvel originals, except with new names and addresses, or penned by John himself. As John explains, "I used real letters wherever possible but, of course, made up and answered my own letters if needed to get a particular point across."

Typical of across of 'Gentle John's' Marvel mannerisms were such colourful phrases as: "Harken to me faithful ones!...Hallelujah and Odin be praised!...Bow down oh mortal ones!...Go to it pilgrims!...and Stan Lee's signature sign-off, "Excelsior!"

John would also contribute a regular Watcha-ma-callit Club section of the *Sunday Observer*, promoting the comic books and discussing Marvel comic history in general.

Launch

The first Newton Comics titles rolled off the presses in May 1975 accompanied by the biggest advertising campaign for comic books ever seen in Australia.

The first titles published in fortnightly rotation were *The Avengers*, *Fantastic Four*, *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Incredible-Hulk* and *Planet Of The Apes*.

The 44-page comics sold for 30c and were published in black and white with colour covers and colour super-hero posters in the centre.

Planet Of The Apes was promoted as the flagship title, capitalizing on the popularity of the movies and TV series.



Full page *Planet Of The Apes* colour ads were printed in the *Sunday Observer*, and a special one-off colour lift-out supplement promoting the TV series and the comics was issued in the June 1, 1975 edition of the newspaper.

There was even a TV commercial voiced by the distinctive gravel tones of stage and TV actor, Gus Mercurio (father of a certain *Strictly Ballroom* dancer) to promote Newton comics.

Max Newton flooded the market with thousands of comics. The heavy promotion paid off with sales of up to 30,000 recorded for the first issues, dropping to around 20,000 for the second and third issues. Further titles were added to the publishing schedule including *Dr Strange*, *Dracula*, *Conan*, *Silver Surfer*, *X-Men* and *Captain America*.

Special

A special issue of *Science Fiction* was published in August to coincide with the first World Science Fiction Convention ever to be held in Australia.

Comic fans were treated to a wide cross section of Marvel history with artists Jack Kirby (*Fantastic Four* and *Avengers*) and Steve Ditko (*Spider-Man*) from Marvel's hey-day beginnings, to more contemporary artists like Barry Windsor Smith (*Conan*), Gene Colan (*Dracula*), Frank Brunner (*Dr Strange*) and Mike Ploog (*Planet Of The Apes*).

In contrast to their somewhat staid Murray Publishing/Planet Comic rivals, Newton Comics provided novelty value with their 'free' colour posters, swap cards, super-hero tee-shirt offers, subscription service, Marvel Mailbag pages, toy prize competitions and discount offers on merchandise.

Novelty value however was not enough to sustain sales. Increases in printing and postage costs saw a page cut to 36 pages with a price rise to 35c. (Max Newton took the Whitlam Labor government and the postal service soundly to task in his newspaper editorials over the 5c increase in postage stamps).

After a few months sales had dropped to 6000 - 8000 per issue. It soon became apparent that sales projections were grossly overestimated, with print runs being too high and returns from newsagents also being substantial.

Marty Dougherty returned from the 1975 Christmas holiday break to find Max Newton had closed the venture down during his absence. On his return, Marty Dougherty persuaded Max Newton to resume publishing with a revamp of titles and schedules.

In a move designed to save on printing and colour costs, the fortnightly publishing schedule was changed to monthly and the free colour posters dropped from many titles.

New titles *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*, *Monsters Unleashed*, *Iron Man*, *Daredevil*, *Thor* and *Submariner* were added to the publishing schedule. Existing titles *Planet Of The Apes*, *Conan* and *Dracula* increased in size to 84 pages for 75c.

Meanwhile about 500,000 unsold comics returned by the newsagents had been dumped in a tin shed at the old Richmond Bitter brewery grounds opposite the *Sunday Observer* offices.

Assigned the task of sorting and redistributing the comics back into the market place was 19-year-old Melbourne University Commerce and Economics student and future career media journalist, Ash Long.

Ash Long today is the Editor of the *Melbourne Observer* and has kept records of his brief association with Newton Comics. Work began in February 1976 for six weeks with a team of fellow university students who would bundle the comics in lots of 100, with a target to redistribute 20,000 comics each week.

Heritage

A label bearing the words 'Heritage Series Cut Bearer Original Reprints' (not just any reprint, these are the definitive original reprints!) was affixed over the original cover price.

The comics were then reissued into the market place with a 20 per cent discount on the original price. Quite often the resold comics sold better the second time around.

Occasionally the 'Heritage Series' labeled issues appear at collectibles fairs and eBay today.

When told of recent high prices paid at auction for Newton Comics on eBay, Ash Long commented in the *Melbourne Observer*, "In a dreamy moment this week, I calculated today's price of that unwanted pile of comic books - most of which we asked for just 24 cents each. Based on the growth multiple of 510...that comic pile is now worth \$61.2 million."

"Perhaps our 1976 crew should have asked for more than \$3 per hour!"

Heritage

Meanwhile the end days for Max Newton's publishing empire were in sight. Burdened by millions of dollars worth of climbing debt, Max's behaviour became more bizarre and desperate. He fell into a destructive cycle of booze and prescription drugs, exhibiting wild and drunken behaviour.

Ash Long witnessed such an event, commenting in his self-published book *Long Shots*: "I was working in the press room and saw the difficulties first hand as Max drunkenly urinated over the reels of newsprint, ready to print." (Archivists should note: yellowing of newsprint is not always necessarily a symptom of its age).

He was dealing in 'contra' where advertising in his newspapers was paid for in goods and services. Max became known as the 'contra king' and his Toorak Road mansion, furnished from the proceeds of contra, became known as 'Contra Castle'.

His marketing men would make creative deals with local businesses to raise cash and stave off the debt collectors. One such transaction saw a fleet of American cars bought from an auto dealer paid for by full page ads in the *Sunday Observer*. The cars were then sold to another dealer and the money raised paid the wages bill.



Ash Long commenting on his *Media Flash* web-site about the problems of bouncing staff pay cheques writes: "...all the cheques were bouncing, as they were for all pay packets at the company."

"I struck a deal with Max, citing an eloquent economic argument about 'survival of the fittest': he was either impressed with the logic or the chutzpah!"

"He'd pass over the cheques half-an-hour before those given to rest of the company's staff...and we'd 'high-tail' it to whatever bank and branch was being used that week."

Ash remembers those days in summary: "They were extraordinary days at an extraordinary company. I was 19 years of age. Equally as extraordinary is the fact that I have kept these records for more than 25 years!"

Receivers

Max Newton voluntarily called in the receivers to get his newspapers and finances in order, only to be dismissed as manager of his own company by telegram from the receivers in April 1976.

For the second time Newton Comics were halted as a scheme of arrangements for the Newton group companies was announced and it was reported that Max Newton's enterprises were \$6 million in debt to some 60 creditors. On one occasion the debt collectors turned up at the *Sunday Observer* offices with a crane.

Max was reported to comment: "Every now and then people came around with a crane to repossess something, in fact that's the last resort of the finance companies - the crane. They came around the day before yesterday and I gave them \$9000 to get rid of them."

A later irreverent comment, typical of Max Newton under pressure: "We've only had three cars repossessed - a light week."

Stopped

Marvel Comics in the US stopped the supply of proofs when no more payment was forthcoming. Newton Comics underwent a further consolidation of titles when printing resumed in August 1976 using whatever supplies of proofs were left.

Titles were amalgamated into giant 84 page and 100 page titles: Newton Triple Action (featuring *Conan*, *Avengers* and *X-men*), Newton Four-In-One (*Spiderman*, *Hulk*, *Iron Man* and *Thor*) and Newton Spectacular (*Fantastic Four*, *Daredevil*, *Silver Surfer* and *Submariner*).

Planet Of The Apes and *Dracula* maintained their 84-page status but all other titles were subsequently dropped.

October 1976 was the last hurrah for Newton Comics as the last remaining proofs were used up and previously released issues were recycled into special giant-sized 100 page editions.

'Gentle John's' Marvel Mailbag page was dropped, as were the competitions, prizes, merchandise and issue numbering.

Oddly enough, these last printed issues were printed on better paper stock than their predecessors and are therefore more likely to turn up at collectibles fairs in much the same condition as they were printed.

The *Sunday Observer* was bought by publisher Peter Isaacson and continued to be published for more than a decade until 1989. The paper was revived in 2002 as the *Melbourne Observer* by its editor, Ash Long.

Acclaim

Meanwhile, the unemployed and bankrupt Max Newton spent the next few years operating a lucrative massage parlour and hard-core pornography business with weekly takings growing to about \$12,000 per week.

His journey back to journalistic credibility began in 1979 with articles in the *Australian Penthouse* on his ever-favourite topic, politics and economics.

A weekly appearance on John Singleton's interview program for Channel 10 in Sydney followed, and Max was once more back in the journalistic limelight.

In 1980 he left Australia to become a financial columnist for Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post*. In 1983 New York Times Books published Max Newton's first book, *The Fed*, about the US central banking system, to wide critical acclaim.

Sadly, this short-lived comeback ended in a final self-destructive urge to seemingly tear down all he had achieved in America.

He invested and lost hundreds of thousands of clients' money in an ill-conceived financial venture. Shortly before his death he returned to the abuses of alcohol which ultimately took its toll. Max Newton passed away in 1990, his death marked by obituaries and tributes across Australia.

Robert Thomas lives in Sydney and works at a local hospital as a medical office manager. He therefore has far too much spare time to indulge in comics, books, movies and articles like this. He can be contacted at rvt@tpg.com.au

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