

Don't Reinvent the Wheel: Magazine idea-sharing in the 1960s.

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Jean Wishart was the editor of the highly successful New Zealand Woman's Weekly (NZWW) from 1952 to 1985. As part of her strategy to develop the magazine she undertook extensive international study tours looking at other popular titles for women. Gavin Ellis has gained access to reports she wrote in the 1960s for the owners of the NZWW and they provide some insight into what she adapted from overseas models as well those elements which did not impress her as suitable for her New Zealand audience.

In the 1960s the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* was the most-read women's magazine in the world per head of population.¹ And its editor travelled the world in search of ideas to keep it there. Jean Wishart put an indelible stamp on the magazine she edited from 1952 to 1985 and had firm views on what it should deliver to its readers each week. She saw the magazine's relationship with readers as a partnership between friends and it had to contain something for everyone.² Over the course of her long editorship the magazine was in a regular cycle of change that Wishart skilfully managed to avoid alienating what she regarded as a loyal audience.



Jean Wishart, a formal portrait in the 1960s.

An essential ingredient of her development strategy was regular contact with her counterparts in other countries and periodic extended study tours to see other titles and their production processes. She had ready access to market-leading titles like *McCall's* (circulation 8.5 million), and *Woman* (2.7 million), to prestigious titles such as *Vogue* and *Marie-Claire*, and even the propaganda gargantuan *Soviet Woman*.³

After each tour she wrote extensive reports for the board of the *Weekly's* publisher, New Zealand News, and used them to change directors' thinking. Each was written in an engaging style that left the impression the reader was being directly addressed. It was a technique she employed in the magazine itself.⁴

The reports reveal that her knowledge spanned the entire gamut of magazine production from commissioning stories and attracting advertising, through complex colour printing, to distribution and marketing. They also show that in the 1960s she had a particularly keen interest in the emergence of 35mm colour photography and its application to cover design. She also was determined to use overseas examples to bolster her case for the creation of a test kitchen at the *Woman's Weekly* which would allow greater creativity in food photography.

When Wishart made her first tour – to Australia in 1960 – the *Weekly's* colour photography was shot largely on Linhof 5x4-inch field cameras, with a 2¼-inch square (120 roll film) camera for secondary shots. There were two reasons: quality, and the fact that photographs could be reproduced at a 1:1 ratio (same size). Pre-press colour enlargement was an expensive process and the *Weekly* was limited to a single projection per issue. She described this as “a handicap” which had led staff photographers to shoot on both the cumbersome 5X4 and on the smaller 2¼-inch format to allow for some variety in layouts.⁵

On that visit she was particularly interested to see how her counterparts were using smaller format colour film. At the time the NZWW had not used a single 35mm colour shot but she found Australian editors more than ready to accept 35mm colour from external sources, although they did not equip their own photographers with small format cameras. At *Woman's Day* she was shown a cover enlarged from 35mm colour film and “it was surprisingly good considering the enlargement”. Wishart noted the quality was not as good as from a larger format, but it was acceptable “and I doubt the average person would have been conscious of much difference”. The Australian titles did, however, continue to favour larger format colour where possible and Wishart was unconvinced that a wholesale

move to smaller formats was warranted – “but if the only suitable picture we had of an important subject (for instance a member of the Royal Family) were a 35 mm, I think we should be prepared to tackle it”.

In spite of this she saw nothing intrinsically magical about the large format. At *Woman's Day* she was shown a layout for an interior decorating feature and was “not at all impressed by the quality.” She added that “if these were an average sample of their photographers' work, I think our standards are much higher” and the NZWW production department would have turned down most of the transparencies. Both the *Australian Women's Weekly* and *Woman's Day*, it appeared to Wishart, were prepared to sacrifice quality for other considerations – “perhaps a little too readily at times”.

On her return to New Zealand she found syndication agencies pressuring her to move to the 35 mm format, claiming it was the current trend and that overseas magazines were stopping their use of large format colour. However, when she visited the United States and the United Kingdom the following year, she found nothing to substantiate the claim. The larger formats continued to be the most regularly used and there was still “considerable use” of full plate (8½x6½ inches). She was, however, surprised to find that most of the leading American women's magazines no longer employed their own photographic staff. The most cited reason was that the use of freelancers provided a variety of photographic techniques. She was not, however, minded to follow that trend, telling her board that it would be “a most inconvenient arrangement and would certainly not be practical for the New Zealand *Woman's Weekly*”.

Her own photographic staff were about to push the envelope. Michael Willison, who joined the NZWW shortly after Wishart's return from the United States and Britain in 1962 later became its long-serving chief photographer. He told the author that within weeks of his arrival at the magazine he was assigned to cover a Royal Tour. He refused to take the Linhof field camera on tour (“it weighed a ton, was complicated, and used a pre-loaded pack of about six sheets of film”). The company provided a 2¼-inch format Mamiya camera for him to use on tour. He became wedded to the format for colour photography and imported Ektachrome 120 roll film through Kodak: “It came by ship and I had to test each batch because, if it had been placed too close to the funnel, the heat affected it.

Willison became a familiar sight, particularly on Royal tours, with at least one 2¼-inch format camera around his neck while

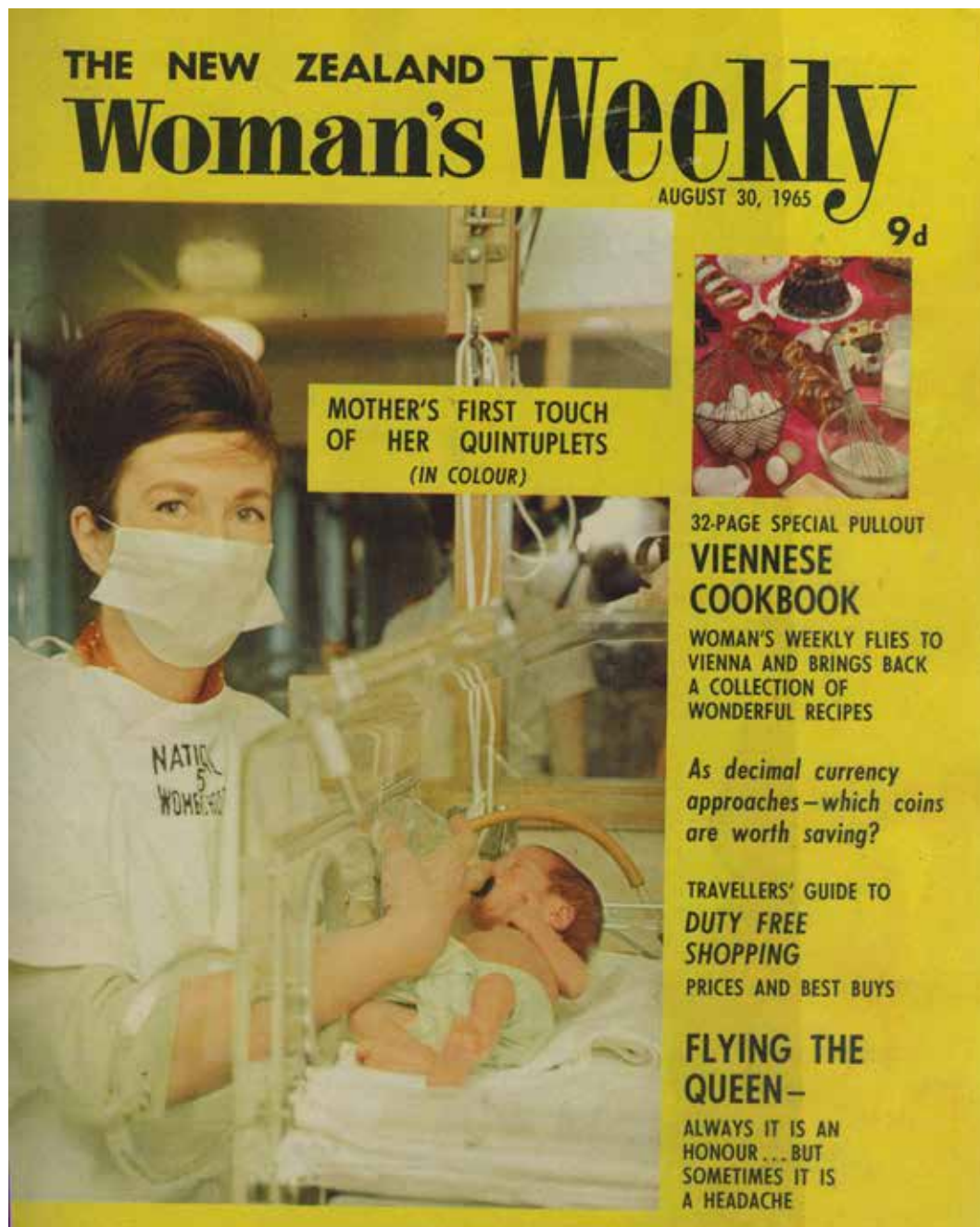
other press photographers – usually shooting monochrome – used exclusively 35 mm. His Mamiya was replaced with Hasselblad and later supplemented with a Canon 35 mm.

By the time Wishart embarked on her next study tour in 1967, colour television had established itself in the United States, robbing magazines of one of their principal selling points – high quality colour pages.⁶ Magazines like *McCall's* now had colour on every page that required it. She found, however, that many magazines continued to use large format cameras for their studio work, although magazines like *Life* (based largely on field assignments) predominantly used 35 mm film.

She noted in her 1967 report that the magazines she visited in the United States had better reproduction than the NZWW, which was printed on newsprint. Willison reinforces the point, admitting that he “slightly over-exposed” his images because newsprint absorbs ink. The boosted colours were absorbed by the newsprint, leaving natural colour ranges on the printed page.



The Weekly's anniversary issue demonstrated the influence Wishart's foreign tours had on its covers in the 60s and 70s.



The 1965 cover of the Lawson Quins. The NZWW had exclusive access to the quins and on-sold story and pictures to the Australian Woman's Weekly. On her study tour to Sydney in 1965 she was told the story had not increased the Australian magazine's circulation that week. It was a massive seller for the NZWW.

Wishart faced mounting external pressure to use 35 mm colour. She admitted in her 1967 report that overseas picture agencies were supplying "increasing quantities" of small format transparencies although she continued to resist their widespread use ("except in exceptional circumstances") on quality grounds. Nevertheless, over time the cost and quality of pre-press colour projection improved. Eventually the quality of NZWW paper stock also improved. This led to progressively greater use of 35 mm although Willison continued routinely to produce 2¼-inch transparencies.

The 1960s was a period of massive social and cultural upheaval. Media research of the period has concentrated largely on the major movements of the period – civil rights, the resurgence of feminism, the anti-war movement, and youth culture (Gitlin 1987). Studies of magazines have been informed by these significant social shifts. For example, even a study of one of Australia's most prominent magazine foods writers of the era, Margaret Fulton, characterised her as 'an activist' (Brien 2011). This research is not divorced from those social influences although they were slower to manifest themselves in the established titles under study here than in the new magazines created in the era. However, it focusses attention on seemingly mundane considerations for women's magazines editors in the 1960s that were, nonetheless, important contributors to their success – photographic quality, design, and the practical requirements of home economics.

Food always played a vital role in the NZWW – the first issue in 1932 had six pages of recipes – and Wishart's overseas studies always included investigations of how overseas magazines handled culinary journalism and photography. In America, she described food as "probably the glamorous subject for photography". At the time, however, the *Weekly's* own arrangements for food photography were problematic. Recipes were cooked at the home of either the contributor or a staff member and the NZWW photographer had to transport large format camera, lights and props to the respective residences to photograph the dishes. The magazine had experienced "difficulties" transporting food to its studio to be photographed. Wishart looked to overseas evidence to support what would eventually become a capital expenditure request to the parent company's board.

The report on her 1960 visit to Australia is, unfortunately, incomplete but the part that survives ends with a discussion about bringing a New Zealand-born cooking demonstrator to this country.⁷ Wishart saw the promotional value in a key component of her magazine. When she undertook her extended tour in 1961/2 she spent

considerable time visiting magazine test kitchens and stated in her report that “all women’s magazines which I visited were equipped with a testing kitchen (sometimes more than one) in their editorial departments.” She added, pointedly, that she “did not find a single magazine which publishes recipes which they have not tested in their own kitchens.” Perhaps she was suggesting the *Weekly’s* publisher might be exposed to some contingent liability taking a contributor’s self-cooked recipe at face value.

Four pages of her 1961/2 report are devoted to home economics research, which included visiting consumer testing organisations and the US Department of Agriculture’s research centre in Maryland. One section of the centre was devoted to optimal kitchen design and she obtained detailed specifications for a test kitchen much smaller than those in American magazines’ editorial department. “It was planned for women who must conserve energy because of age or physical disability...or any able-bodied women who also want to save time and energy, which presumably includes everyone.” Three years later the plans were used to create the NZWW’s first test kitchen, led by its food icon Tui Flower.

Wishart also brought back an idea for a ‘props room’ containing a host of objects to be used in food styling. The importance of this annex should not be under-estimated. Matalon-Degni (2010)⁸ describes the prop stylist as “the unsung hero of the food photography team.” Willison was responsible for food styling and photography in the test kitchen and favoured the large format 5x4 camera because its tilting back made it easier to control the plane of focus.⁹ However, studio lighting created issues – and heat – and he persuaded Wishart to invest in a studio flash system. He admits that styling sometimes required ruining the food – by painting it with oil to achieve a gloss.

The NZWW test kitchen had been in operation for two years when Wishart undertook her next tour. She noted that American magazines tended to have larger kitchens, but all were adjacent to the editorial department, a feature she had insisted upon in Auckland. The closest comparison to the New Zealand installation was at *Woman’s Realm* in London, also a weekly magazine. However, she admitted it had one advantage over the NZWW: If the editor thought food should have been photographed from a different angle, the dish was cooked and photographed again. Her report noted: “This, of course, would not be practical for us, and we have to live with our mistakes...and try as hard as possible not to make them in the first place.”

Wishart was a magazine polymath and her overseas studies

reflected her broad range of interests, but one aspect of her trade kept recurring in her reports – what went into deciding the cover of this week’s or this month’s magazine?

Pictorial quality was a primary consideration for Wishart, and she was critical in her reports of magazines that sacrificed quality without good cause. She was opposed, for example, to using 35 mm images on the cover simply because the editor liked the subject. However, she admitted in her 1960 report that certain circumstances do seem to justify it.¹⁰ This included timeliness and the cover was regarded by both the *Australian Woman’s Weekly* and *Women’s Day* as the ‘last page’ in the deadline schedule. She also found that *Women’s Day* was prepared to ‘fake’ covers: “They showed me one which they had done of the Shah of Persia and his bride-to-be, which they published at the time of his wedding. To make this they used black and white pictures of the Shah and the girl and faked the colour. These were superimposed on a background shot of a Persian scene, which was reproduced from a colour transparency.”

American magazines she visited on her 1961/2 tour appeared positively profligate in their approach to cover design and selection. For example, she recounted how *Family Circle* drew up at least four dummy covers for each issue and took each to the platemaking and colour proofing stage before deciding which to use – and often seeking the preferences of women in supermarkets. In Britain she was invited to participate in *Woman and Beauty’s* cover conference and found they had “no hesitation in scrapping the (large format whole plate) picture and telling the photographer to start all over again.” She noted that cover ‘gimmicks’ such as stickers, gatefolds and transparent plastic overlayers were beginning to gain popularity in the United States and was somewhat bemused by the fact that “although they are of no conceivable value to the reader, [they] convey the impression of giving ‘something extra’.”

Wishart was also mindful of the role fashion played inside women’s magazines and her visits always included discussions over fashion layouts, although she was unimpressed with the manufacturing quality of some American garments. Nevertheless, she was impressed by the influence that magazines such as *American Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* had on the fashion industry. “They have sufficient power to select ideas not as yet produced in quantity, give them their blessing, and force American manufacturers to jump on their bandwagon... other magazines which feature fashion (in England and Australia, for example) give the impression they are merely giving free publicity to

garment manufacturers. They can report but they do not have the power to originate."

At times the pace of her travel was frenetic – she was in Paris for only a day, which was spent at *Marie Claire* – and conceded in her 1961/2 report that sometimes her schedule outpaced her, with unfortunate results. "I'm probably the only New Zealand woman to turn down (Royal couturier) Norman Hartnell. He was waiting to see me in London, and I had to ring him up and explain my appointments were running so late I wouldn't have time to fit him in."

Jean Wishart's often lengthy study tours were predicated on the knowledge that "as ideas and tastes in other things change, magazines must be perceptive enough to change with them." However, although her research embraced developments such as the rise of magazines for young women, none of her reports in the 1960s – a period in which, after a four-decade lull, feminism began to regeminate (Beins 2017)¹¹ – directly address the rise of the women's movement.¹²

She did, however, identify related trends. By 1967 even American magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* were running what Wishart described as 'frank' articles. "Factual and handled in good taste, these articles are nevertheless, of the type which the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* would have, in the past, hesitated to run. However, I think they are symptomatic of today's more candid attitude concerning sex and other formerly taboo subjects...I think that *Woman's Weekly* may have to follow this lead. I believe strongly in preserving the family image of the magazine, but we cannot close our eyes to the fact that the majority of readers are becoming more 'adult' in their tastes." *Harper's Bazaar's* editor, Nancy White, told Wishart that the most serious mistake any editor could make was to underestimate the intelligence of readers and women probably had a far greater range of interests than men, "from the lowbrow to the intellectual – all in the one woman."

Wishart was interviewed by the *Auckland Star* on her return from the 1967 tour. The story ended: "And as Miss Wishart lands at Auckland International Airport her last memories are of the lights of Lisbon, the paintings of Paris, and her research for the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly*." Five years later she was off once more to the United States, Brazil, Britain, Sweden, Greece, Thailand, Hong Kong and Australia. Her meticulous expense records are among her papers but the report from that study tour has not survived.



The first cover of the New Zealand Woman's Weekly published on the 8 December, 1932.

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END NOTES

- 1 Mediascope in February 1969 stated the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* reached 26.1% of the adult female New Zealand population, followed by the *Australian Women's Weekly* at 19.9% of the Australian female population and *Chatelaine* at 17.4% of Canada's equivalent. The two largest circulation women's magazines were *McCall's* in the United States, which reached only 13.4% of the female population and *Woman* in the United Kingdom, which reached 9.8%.
- 2 Jenny Lynch, *New Zealand Woman's Weekly 70 Years: From Pavlovas to Prime Ministers*. (Auckland: Random House, 2002).
- 3 On a 1967 visit to Moscow, Wishart met the editor-in-chief of *Soviet Women*, Maria Ovsyannikova, who freely admitted the magazine (which had a larger circulation outside the Soviet Union than within it) was 'political' but added that western magazines reflected the capitalist way of life so they, too, were 'political'. Wishart observed the magazine was "quite well presented" and its tone "varies strangely between being harshly realistic and political...and being strangely ingenious" (a reference to an essay competition in which "those who win will get a free copy of the book [and] those who do not win can buy it"). Ovsyannikova was the editor of a front-line newspaper during the Second World War and was twice awarded the Order of Lenin.
- 4 The reports from the 1960s have survived among papers that, on her death, were passed to one of her successors as editor, Jenny Lynch.
- 5 Australian magazines tried to limit projections to two per issue but were allowed to use more if layouts required it.
- 6 Wishart made a particular study of the effect of television on magazines during her 1967 tour. She noted seasonal variations in viewing numbers (from a monthly household average of 117 hours in the depths of winter down to 82 hours a month in the height of summer). US magazines had begun to capitalise on these seasonal variations (which contrasted with magazines' almost constant circulation throughout the seasons) and coined a phrase used with advertising agencies – 'the medium that never takes a vacation'.
- 7 The cooking demonstrator was Gretta Anna Terplitzky, whose cookbook *The Gretta Anna Recipes* ran to 15 editions. On her death in 2010, she was described by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as a woman who "cooked her way into the hearts and homes of thousands of Sydneysiders".
- 8 Francine Matalon-Degni. "Trends in Food Photography: A prop stylist's view," *Gastronomica*, 10. No.3 (Summer 2010): 70-83.
- 9 Since replaced by tilt-shift lenses. Willison also favoured the 5x4 camera for scenic and architectural photography, in order to correct vertical distortion.
- 10 The 'certain circumstances' included misjudging just how popular a subject would be. The *Australian Women's Weekly* totally underestimated the popular appeal of evangelist Dr Billy Graham and decided to change its cover by working three shifts to still meet the printing deadline.
- 11 Agatha Beins. *Liberation in Print: Feminist periodicals and Social Movement Identity* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017).
- 12 She noted in 1961/2 that "in their general content, I feel that the average English magazine for women does not credit its readers with as much intelligence as the average American magazine – and (I hope) the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly*."