



Miss Chapman: still offers old-fashioned service in a world where computers have replaced human contact — Picture: GEOFF BEATTY

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The very private Miss Chapman

By BERWYN LEWIS

FROM a corner of her bookshop, with its distinctive vertical stacks, Miss Chapman surveys her domain. Compared with today's computer-controlled, open-plan and scrupulously ordered palaces of conspicuous consumption, Miss Chapman's shop, Clay's, remains faithful to another era.

She, and it, have been in business in Sydney's Macleay St, Kings Cross, since 1954. For 34 years bohemians, artists, writers, eccentrics, book lovers and those simply in need of a dictionary or cook-book have halted in front of her windows, and, overcome by temptation, gone in.

In 1941 Miss Chapman came to Sydney from Melbourne. "There were no other bookshops apart from Miss Hood's, an old-fashioned place up near the (Kings Cross) fire station — and a few little lending libraries. This was a lending library when I bought it."

When she first came to Sydney the streets were crowded with American servicemen, the Cross and its surrounds had style, even poetry — both of which were immortalised in Kenneth Slessor's *Darlinghurst Nights*. But since the R&R days the mood has changed, although the navy rates among Miss Chapman's best customers.

And the residents remain loyal. Some have moved away but their children and grandchildren come in. "And I have a lot of country customers," she says.

"I send books interstate and sometimes get calls from London. It's a pretty well-known bookshop," Miss Chapman says with sublime understatement. Clay's and Miss Chapman were recently described as "the last living treasure in the profession" by Nicholas Pounder, a local bookshop owner.

Miss Chapman observes another change: the Bicentenary and the big publishers have brought Australian authors to the front of the shop window. "There are now so many. Some are good. Some fall a little by the wayside, but they take their place with the overseas books," she says, perched on her stool, surrounded by horizontally stacked towers of books. ("We don't have anywhere else to put them.")

Miss Chapman is a very private person. It's difficult to make a connection with her in her bookshop lookout. So we talk of reading habits.

"At one time more Hemingway, Faulkner and Huxley was read. The taste is now for good thrillers and literary biographies. And dictionaries, and teaching yourself language books. It's a reflection of young people wanting to travel. We're in the backpacker area and they come for different books on Australia. And we have a large following of people wanting to buy art and gardening books . . . is there anything else you wanted to ask me?" she inquires, rather like royalty dismissing a servant.

What about old-fashioned service? She thinks other bookstore owners use computers too much. "I realise they must in large stores, but the personal side goes out of it. When I order a book or unpack it I have particular customers in mind

Behind The Book

who may like it. When the person comes in you suggest it."

Miss Chapman's training began in the 1930s at a leading Melbourne bookshop, Marguerita Webber's. "I was a failed academic," Miss Chapman volunteers.

"I had to get a job because it was the Depression. I began driving a car delivering library books to masters of university colleges and professional people in Melbourne. In the afternoons I worked in Everyman's Bookshop and Library. The owner had a small gallery there too, where Rupert Bunny and other well-known Melbourne artists exhibited. I'd always wanted to work there. I was tried for a fortnight and stayed eight years."

And after that she opened Clay's?

"No. No. No!"

"I worked in Anthony Hordern's in Sydney. It had a tremendous bookshop, a whole floor of books. During the war years I was second in charge there. Then I went to Craftsman Bookshop in Hosking Place, and after that I opened my own."

But Miss Chapman dismisses the notion that it was a love for books which determined her destiny among them. "I wanted a job," she retorts. "I was selected from 30 applicants. That was something at the time."

As for being described as "a living treasure", Miss Chapman says she is very flattered. "I've been in the book trade longer than anyone else. That's about what it amounts to."

But now the trade has changed: "American firms are taking over British publishers." The cost of books is also changing dramatically, but, as Miss Chapman says, "it's all relative. People get paid more. I can remember when the first Penguins came to Melbourne; they were tenpence and one and twopence — but I was earning about £4.10 shillings a week."

But she is reluctant to be drawn into talking too much of the old days. The mention of Kenneth Slessor exasperates her. "Everyone who wants to interview me is mad on Kenneth Slessor. They ask did you know Kenneth Slessor? Did he come into the shop?"

But he lived around this area?

"Yes, he used to walk past, do his shopping, but I didn't know him. He'd look through the window, come in and buy a book. We sell his poetry." And Rosaleen Norton, the so-called Kings Cross demonologist? "I didn't know her. She used to frequent the place next door. She was a character, that's all." Did she see very much of the Kings Cross bohemian life? "Not really. I knew Dobell, Russell Drysdale and Bill Constable. Bohemian people don't mean anything much to me."

Miss Chapman says the books she likes best span an era from Mary Grant Bruce (read at the age of seven) to today's South Americans, like Isabel Allende and Garcia Marquez, with writers of the '30s in between. Her earliest memories are of having *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Jessica's First Prayer* read to her. "I was given original copies of *Snugglypot* and

Cuddlepie by May Gibbs. But I was a bit older then."

And she remembers *Coles Funny Picture Books* and *Coles Book Arcade* in Melbourne — opposite where Myers now stands, and later situated between Little Collins and Collins Sts.

"It was a wonderful place in the '20s. They had boxes of books for a penny and twopence. And upstairs they had a zoo. Mr E.W. Cole, with beard and top hat, used to march through that arcade every afternoon at 3 o'clock and a dreadful brass band used to strike up. We used to wander through after school, even though we were forbidden and supposed to go straight home. They had wonderful concave and convex mirrors and we used to laugh ourselves silly looking at ourselves."

Inquiring further into her reading preferences is not easy. Miss Chapman's response is that she has read almost every book in her shop — otherwise, she says, how could she recommend them? But if she were going to buy a book for herself, what would she choose?

Miss Chapman shrugs with despair. "Oh, that's a bit silly to ask me. I have proof copies sent to me. I don't have to buy books. I have no idea."

Well. Thank you Miss Chapman.

Suddenly Miss Chapman recovers. "I have a very good assistant, Mrs Menzies. She's a great help. How long have you been here with me, Judith? Fifteen years?" Miss Chapman and Mrs Menzies stand by the door, signalling that the interview has drawn to a close.

"Make it neat and concise," insists Miss Chapman by way of farewell.