

Most Important Industry:

HOW THE NEW ZEALAND STATE GOT INTERESTED IN RURAL WOMEN, 1930-1944



THE HISTORY of the Department (now Ministry) of Agriculture reaches back to the early days of European settlement in New Zealand. It might have its formal origin in the amalgamation of the Livestock and the Agricultural Branches of the Lands Department in 1892, but state regulation of aspects of agricultural production has been with us since the first governmental efforts to prevent animal disease in 1853.¹ Quality control of export commodities, disease control and pest eradication, research into improved methods of production, and extension services to encourage these improvements to be taken up by farmers: these comprised the major spheres of the Department's activities between 1892 and 1939, together with policy advice to the Minister of Agriculture. In all this the Department worked closely with — the more cynical would say was controlled by — the 'farmer-politicians of Featherston Street',² the Dominion Executive of Federated Farmers, all male, apart from the token Women's Division representative, and its more openly titled forebear, the Farmers' Union. Indeed, it would be true to say that everything about the Department was male in these years: its professional staff; its political masters, both formal and informal; and the clientele for its work. Attention was focused rigorously on production, which was assumed to be an exclusively masculine sphere of activity.

By the end of the Second World War this smooth edifice of male power had a single crack. It was heralded in the Department's annual report for 1944: 'In recent years it has become more and more evident throughout the world that the success of the agriculture of any country does not depend merely on its soils and climate and the technical efficiency of its farmers, with which work the Department has long been primarily concerned in the past. It has been gradually realised that agricultural economics and the sociological aspects of farming are equally important and play their part in

1 The work reported in this paper was supported by a U.G.C. research grant, which is gratefully acknowledged.

2 P. R. Stephens, 'The Department of Agriculture', *New Zealand Journal of Agriculture*, LXXXV (1952), pp.371-6.

3 G. McLauchlan, *McMeeken: a Biography*, Auckland, 1982, p.14.

determining the success or failure of our agricultural industries.’⁴ These words presaged a major internal reorganization of the Department, with a new Division being created to promote research-based work in farm management, agricultural economics, farm engineering, farm forestry, and rural sociology. The last group is the one which concerns us, for it was radically different from all others in the Department. Almost entirely female in composition — one man was employed as a Rural Sociologist between 1948 and 1966 (and it will surprise nobody to learn that he had formal charge of the Rural Sociology Section) — it liaised with the Women’s Division of Federated Farmers and the Women’s Institutes rather than with the male body of Federated Farmers. It was concerned not with agricultural production but with the reproduction of the conditions which permitted production to take place. ‘Field officers in rural sociology have continued to provide an advisory service in domestic science for country women’ ran the rubric in the Department’s annual reports in the mid-1950s: on one occasion somebody created a glorious Freudian slip by substituting ‘an advisory service for domestic service’,⁵ which was uncomfortably close to the truth.

Our interest here does not lie in the history of the Rural Sociology Section, but in its prehistory. Why did the edifice crack? what led the Department of Agriculture to take the life conditions and problems of rural women seriously for the first time? And why, having decided to ‘do something’ for rural women, did the Department set up a home science extension service and call it rural sociology? For one remarkable fact about these rural sociologists is that apart from the man who ran the Section (and, possibly, one of the field workers late in the Section’s history), none of them had the faintest idea what rural sociology comprised. They were all trained in home science at Otago University, and they worked very much in the way that home science extension workers employed by the National Council for Adult Education worked. When an attempt was made to do something closer to rural sociology, as with an ambitious survey of housing conditions in the late 1940s, the results were catastrophic.

In seeking to answer these linked questions we must look first at the emergence of home science extension in New Zealand. We then will examine how a fateful conjuncture came to be made between home science extension and rural sociology, and how this conjuncture was reinforced under wartime conditions. However potty the arrangements made in 1944 may appear today with the benefit of forty years’ hindsight, they made sense at the time. Our task is to show why they made sense.

Home science in New Zealand emerged from the same matrix that gave us the Plunket Society:⁶ indeed, F. C. Batchelor and Truby King were en-

4 Department of Agriculture, Annual Report 1944–5, *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (AJHR), 1945, H-29, p.23.

5 Department of Agriculture, Annual Report 1954–5, AJHR, 1955, H-29, p.20.

6 E. Olssen, ‘Truby King and the Plunket Society: an Analysis of a Prescriptive Ideology’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, XV (1981), pp.3–23.

thusiastic early supporters of home science.⁷ The moving spirit was a close associate of King's, Colonel John Studholme, a leading member of the Canterbury squattocracy. He had seen the impressive growth of home science in American land grant colleges, and believed that there was a need for a similar development in New Zealand. Consequently in 1908 he offered to endow a Chair in Canterbury University College. His offer was accepted, and he was sent head-hunting for a 'Lady Professor' in America. He found his candidate in Miss Ann Gilchrist, Dean of Home Economics at the University of Tennessee. She accepted the post, but then got married. This caused her to withdraw her application, and the attempt to establish home science in Christchurch collapsed 'with broad smiles and some sighs of relief'.⁸ Nothing daunted, Studholme made the same offer to Otago in 1909, and again was accepted. This time he chose as professor Miss Boys-Smith from Cheltenham Ladies' College. She returned 'Home' in 1920, and Studholme engineered the appointment of Mrs Strong (née Gilchrist) as her replacement. Thus Professor Strong came to New Zealand thirteen years later than originally intended, and to a different college.⁹

The establishment of the Home Science School in Otago rather than Canterbury had significant consequences. Canterbury University College offered a generalist education, which would permit interesting cross-disciplinary developments to emerge in the 1930s. Otago, by contrast, was the home of the Special Schools: the first home of the Home Science School was a tin shed recently vacated by the School of Mines. More important than this, however, Otago had the only Medical School in the country. Since home science was taken by Studholme to have important paramedical implications, the new development sat in the shade of the college's medical barons. Both the internal political arrangements of the college and the predilections of the first professor guided the curriculum for undergraduates and diplomates in the direction of a rigorous natural science-based training. In America, by contrast, social scientific influences were much stronger. The history of home science in New Zealand might well have been different if the School had been established under Strong at Canterbury, where social science might have flourished, rather than under Boys-Smith at Otago, where efforts to establish sociology have always withered.

When Strong arrived in Otago her main thrust for change came not through trying to reform the curriculum radically — perhaps she recognized a hopeless task when she saw one — but through establishing an extension service from the School. It was an uphill road, but by 1925 she was involved in farm schools sponsored by the farm advisory staff from the Fields Division of the Department of Agriculture and the Otago Farmers' Union.

7 A.M.G. Strong, *History of the Development of University Education in Home Science in New Zealand, 1911-1936*, Dunedin, 1936, pp.6-7.

8 W. J. Gardner, E. T. Beardsley, and T. E. Carter, *A History of the University of Canterbury, 1873-1973*, Christchurch, 1973, p.117.

9 Anon, *School of Home Science: History, 1911-1961*, Dunedin, 1962, pp.7, 14.

For two decades she sought state support unsuccessfully for home science extension:¹⁰ rural women were unworthy objects for the disbursement of government monies.

But the government was not the only possible source of funds. In 1929 Strong applied successfully to the Carnegie Trust of New York for funding of a modest programme in Otago and Southland. 'Thus came into being the Home Science Extension Service, which for five years (1930-35) gave a free service of radio talks (twice weekly), lectures at W.I. [Women's Institute] and W. D. [Women's Division of Federated Farmers] monthly meetings (two-monthly), conducted leaders' schools, ran bottling clubs in conjunction with the Boys' and Girls' Agricultural Club, prepared and issued study boxes on home-science topics, and answered thousands of inquiries by letter and telephone.'¹¹ Two tutors and an office assistant were employed in this programme from 1930. In 1932 a similar, but even more modest, effort was started in Victoria University College, Wellington, when the first Sarah Ann Rhodes Fellow began offering home science extension services throughout the college's district. Once again the threads lead back to Colonel Studholme: Sarah Ann Rhodes was his aunt, upon whom he prevailed to make a generous bequest to Victoria in the hope that this might prime the pump for a fully-fledged Department of Home Science in the college.¹² It did not work, and the Fellow ploughed a very lonely furrow.

Sociology was not established as a university discipline in New Zealand until 1957: thus it might be expected that there would be no New Zealand rural sociology before the Second World War. This was not the case. A group of amateur sociologists did valuable work in the 1930s — work that was better than anything that New Zealand sociologists have produced in the rural field until very recent years.

It is possible to find some serious attention being given to quasi-sociological aspects of New Zealand rural life before the 1930s;¹³ but that decade saw the major work. Some was produced by men who earned their crust as economists, such as Horace Belshaw's classic article on agricultural labour and his edited New Zealand country report on agricultural organization¹⁴, both written from Auckland University College; and W. T. Doig's well-known study of the living conditions of dairy farmers.¹⁵ Doig was a

10 Strong, p.24.

11 V. Macmillan, 'The Home in the Country: What the A.C.E. Does for the Farmer's Wife', *New Zealand Journal of Agriculture*, LVIII (1939), p.51.

12 Strong, p.11.

13 H. Belshaw, 'Some Aspects of the Country Life Movement in New Zealand', *Monthly Bulletin of Agricultural Economics and Sociology*, April 1929.

14 H. Belshaw, 'Agricultural Labour in New Zealand', *International Labour Review*, XXVIII (1933); H. Belshaw, ed., *Agricultural Organisation in New Zealand: a Survey of Land Utilisation, Farm Organisation, Finance and Marketing*, Melbourne, 1936.

15 W. T. Doig, *A Survey of Standards of Life of New Zealand Dairy-Farmers*, Wellington, 1940. See also J. H. Robb, 'The Life and Death of Official Social Research in New Zealand, 1936-1940', unpublished paper presented to conference of the Sociological Association of Australia and New Zealand, Christchurch, 1981.

member of the Economics Department at Otago until plucked out to join the new (and short-lived) Social Science Section of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research in Wellington. The other major contribution was made by men whose home discipline was education: the most significant work here, of course, was Crawford Somerset's pioneering attempt to apply the Lynds' Middletown studies in rural Canterbury.¹⁶

From half a century away these different efforts may appear to have little in common except their authors' lack of formal training in sociology. In fact, however, all were intimately connected. An interest in the infant Workers' Educational Association was one important link. The W.E.A. link really combines two connections. One is a commitment to imaginative forms of adult education (the ostensible reason for *Littledene's* genesis); the other is political radicalism. Belshaw was a close friend of Crawford Somerset. W.E.A. tutor on the West Coast for a time, he later became Professor of Economics at Auckland University College, and a leading light in the local, radical, W.E.A. branch. Doig's study was undertaken for the Institute of Pacific Relations, whose American activities were to come under official proscription during the Cold War. Belshaw's country report was commissioned by the same Institute, for which he served a term as Research Secretary in succession to J. B. Condliffe. Somerset was an important node in a network around James Shelley, Professor of Education at Canterbury, which took Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* as the text for what needed to be done in rural Canterbury. Other members of this network were C. E. Beeby (later Director-General of Education, and much else); J. B. Condliffe, Professor of Economics at Canterbury and later at Berkeley; and Geoff Alley, subsequently the founding Director of the National Library. Shelley later became Director of Broadcasting.

Shelley was influential in the Canterbury W.E.A.¹⁷ His conception of the Association's role was less openly political than that common in Belshaw's Auckland branch, or indeed than that of some of his Canterbury colleagues. For Shelley the W.E.A. principally was to be an agent of high culture in the countryside, taking performances of Shakespeare to the farmers and good books to the country merchants. In order to overcome the formidable logistical difficulties books were distributed in boxes to local agents in particular places, who then distributed them to individual members: the same procedure was used by the Home Science Extension Service from Otago. But Shelley considered that this was not the only way to get books around the countryside. He, too, turned to the Carnegie Trust. In 1930 the Trust made a five-year grant for the establishment and maintenance of the Canterbury Adult Rural Travelling Library,¹⁸ and Geoff Alley was set trundling the province's roads in a book van.

North Island dissatisfaction with the fact that the two Carnegie enterprises operated only in the South Island generated a conference in

16 H. C. D. Somerset, *Littledene: a New Zealand Rural Community*, Wellington, 1938.

17 J. B. Condliffe, *The Beginnings of the W.E.A.*, Wellington, 1968, p.22.

18 Strong, p.25.

Wellington in 1932 to discuss a national home science extension service. The spur was the Trust's insistence on co-operative work among university colleges as a condition of further funding, but the proposal foundered on mistrust among the four colleges. In 1934 the Trust agreed to fund the South Island schemes for a further five years on two conditions. The first was that the grant would reduce by one-sixth each year, encouraging a search for local funding. The second was that Canterbury University College and Otago University had to co-operate in running the schemes. The result was the Association for Country Education (A.C.E.), an umbrella organization for extension work between 1935 and 1939. A.C.E. employed an organizer, four home science tutors, a tutor/librarian (Geoff Alley) and a drama tutor.¹⁹

A.C.E. was a marriage of convenience engineered by the need to meet the Carnegie Trust's funding criteria. Indeed, the Trust profoundly shaped the New Zealand extension movement, not only by direct grants but also by funding inward and outward visits. Those leaving New Zealand included Professor Strong on sabbatical leave to update her knowledge of American home economics work, Gwen and Crawford Somerset to study adult educational innovation in America and Britain, J. E. Strachan (another member of the Shelley network) to study rural education, and C. E. Beeby. The inward American flow included in 1928 Dean-Emeritus James Earle Russell, who approved the initial grants to Strong and Shelley; Dr Coffman, whose 1931 visit generated the 1932 abortive Wellington meeting; and Dr Frederick Keppel, the Carnegie Corporation's President, in 1934. Keppel's visit produced the A.C.E.

The Carnegie Trust shaped more than the organizational form of New Zealand rural extension work; it also shaped the intellectual climate. Crucial here was the Trust's support for visits by two leading American rural sociologists: E. de S. Brunner from Columbia University, and J. H. Kolb from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Brunner already was closely tied to the Shelley network through Somerset's admiration of his work.²⁰ In 1937 Carnegie money brought him to New Zealand as a star performer at the major adult education conference sponsored by the New Education Fellowship (another Shelley group front organization). In six papers he gave a tendentiously glowing account of the way in which land grant college-based rural sociology was infusing and deepening rural extension programmes in the United States.²¹ Kolb arrived in 1938, funded by the Carnegie Trust to assist Doig's D.S.I.R. dairy study. He reinforced Brunner's message.

'Rural sociology' is a phrase which to the New Zealander might seem to describe some sort of advanced theoretical science, but its great practical importance and

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.26.

²⁰ Somerset, pp.99, 100.

²¹ A. E. Campbell, ed., *Modern Trends in Education*, Wellington, 1938, pp.329-33, 365-414.

wide possibilities were made clear when Professor Kolb explained the nature of the work that is being carried on in American farming communities. It appeared to be a development for which New Zealand possesses a ready avenue.

'Rural sociology is just good sociology at work in the country', was the way in which he summed the subject up. . . . 'We help the various farm organisations all we can. We help them with their local programmes of adult education, which includes dramatics, music and other arts, and with their county planning. This is the planning of the social and economic programme for the whole season. . . .'

Professor Kolb said results had shown that the work had great practical value in making farmers' organisations more effective both in agricultural and in social relationships. It helped them to improve their social activity and to make their needs and demands more effectively recognised — not politically, but from a social and economic point of view. It opened up aspects of farming life which they had probably not realised before. There were agricultural agents, home agents and junior club leaders working to organise discussions on current problems and to open up broader spheres of activity.²²

Heady stuff. Rural sociology seemed to be a strong, academically respectable discipline which could encompass the various extension efforts previously made in rural New Zealand, and provide a basis for massive further development. The accounts of Brunner and Kolb were taken at face value. There was nobody in New Zealand with the training and knowledge to be able to identify the problems in contemporary American rural sociology,²³ problems that would have militated against the success of Kolb's gung-ho programme in New Zealand, even had it been pursued seriously. In the absence of that knowledge, home science extension and adult education, welded uncertainly together in the A.C.E., were bolted, through Carnegie money, on to a rural sociology whose value was wholly speculative.

A.C.E. was established in 1935. It faced the major difficulty of finding additional funding to supplement the planned reduction in its Carnegie grant. The election of the first Labour government, however, changed the climate governing state involvement in extension work.²⁴

Colder financial circumstances forced major changes. Fees for the Otago home science extension services rose sharply, successfully offsetting grant reductions in this area. For the travelling library the prospect was bleaker. The van was mothballed immediately, and the stock broken down into box lots, as in the old W.E.A. days. This unsatisfactory arrangement was terminated in 1937, when the government established the Country Library Service, with Geoff Alley as officer in charge. A.C.E.'s library resources were transferred to the new body.²⁵ The tutor post thus released

22 *New Zealand Farmer Weekly*, Auckland, 2 March 1938.

23 G. M. Hooks, 'A New Deal for Farmers and Social Scientists: the Politics of Rural Sociology in the Depression Era', *Rural Sociology*, XLVIII (1983), pp.386-408; H. Newby, 'Rural Sociology in These Times', *American Sociologist*, XVII (1983), p.62.

24 Condliffe, p.27.

25 Macmillan, p.54.

was used to appoint a specialist child development tutor. A.C.E.'s interest in drama, and more generally in adult education outside home science extension, disappeared in 1938 when the Shelley group (fitting in nicely with the attitudes and predilections of the Labour government) was instrumental in setting up another state-funded front organization: the National Council of Adult Education. This body allocated funds to both Canterbury University College and Otago University for adult education development, breaking the co-operative link through A.C.E. All that was left to A.C.E. was the home science section run from the Otago Home Science School. When Carnegie funds finally dried up, the title of the section reverted to Home Science Extension, and the government finally provided direct grant funding.²⁶

The scene now shifts to the Department of Agriculture. In 1938 the Minister of Agriculture, W. Lee Martin, wrote: 'It has been my policy since assuming office to build up the advisory services of the Department rather than promote fresh regulations and increase the inspectorial work.'²⁷ A major part of this increased emphasis on advisory work was borne by the revamped *New Zealand Journal of Agriculture*, published by the Department since 1910. The *Journal* was 'converted from a semi-scientific, semi-instructional publication into a journal of farm instruction providing a continuous flow of information in every branch of farming activity'.²⁸ A larger format, more illustrations, and a much less forbidding prose style made it more popular, and the circulation rose.

The June 1938 issue of the *Journal* contained another significant innovation. Unheralded in any previous issue, there sprouted a women's section: 'The Farm Home and Kitchen', contributed by the Home Science School at Otago. This became a regular feature, though formal responsibility passed to the A.C.E. in December 1938. A steady diet of recipes, dietetics and household hints eventually palled, however. In late 1940 the *Journal's* (male) editor wrote to the (male) Director-General of Agriculture:

For some time I have been dissatisfied with the Women's Section of the *Journal*. At present we are running health notes, contributed by the Health Department, and a 'Farm Home and Kitchen' section contributed by the A.C.E. The health notes are good, but the second section is too restricted in its appeal. It is concerned mostly with cooking recipes and household hints and lacks general appeal.

Without commitment, I asked a capable woman freelance journalist, Miss Mary Kitching, to submit the outline of a women's section with more general appeal, and the material she has written appears to conform more closely to what a women's section should contain. Much of the matter may be trivial, but it has the ultimate touch which seems to be essential in a women's section.²⁹

Mary Kitching was to be paid a commercial rate: five pounds per month for

26 Anon, *School of Home Science*, p.14.

27 Department of Agriculture, Annual Report 1937-8, AJHR, 1938, H-29, p.1.

28 *ibid*, p.7.

29 Owen to Cockayne, 11 September 1940, Ag. 1953, Government Archives, Wellington.

six thousand words of copy, with an additional pound for prizes in a monthly competition which she would run. The Director-General recommended this proposal to the minister on 20 September 1940, and it was approved five days later. 'Mary's At Home' first appeared in the January 1941 issue, and marked a startling break with what had gone before.

Table 1 presents a content analysis of the women's section of the *Journal* between July 1937 and December 1945, divided into six-monthly periods. The last row of figures shows the column centimetres of copy in each period, excluding advertisements. We see a marked difference between the time before the end of 1940, when the Otago Home Science School and the A.C.E. ran the section, and the time of 'Mary's At Home': the amount of copy more than doubled under Mary Kitching and her successor. Equally striking, however, is the range of material covered. In 1938 the Home Science School provided an unrelieved diet of recipes, advice on food preparation, and dietetics. This remained the core under the A.C.E., but until the second half of 1940 it was relieved by an infusion of advice on household management, the odd moral homily, and some general features. Several of these features were advertisements for the A.C.E.'s services. In late 1940 the fare slipped back to the monotonous routine typical under the Home Science School, stirring the *Journal's* editor to unwontedly radical action. Under Mary Kitching the section was transformed. Each month an editorial of glutinous sanctimoniousness set a high moral tone for the rest of the section. Features on cookery and diet still made up a significant proportion of the copy, but much less than hitherto. New elements were articles on beauty and fashion (often, in the early years, tied to Hollywood studios' publicity photographs of dimly shining starlets), book reviews and snippets of verse. A regular gardening column was tried for a year, to copy a popular feature in the *New Zealand Dairy Exporter's* women's section, but seems not to have been a success. Much more successful were two other features copied from the *Exporter*: a column for readers' letters, and a monthly essay competition for small cash prizes. The other elements might fluctuate over time: health, beauty and fashion going down, unpredictable eruptions of material on literature and on household management; but the two feedback elements always made up at least a quarter of the total copy. In the darkest period of the war, between July 1942 and June 1943, the proportion rose to a half.

Mary Kitching ran the women's section as an unfree freelance until February 1944, having been required to make a written undertaking that she would not write for any other farm paper. Mrs Enid Phillips took over in March that year on the same conditions, and ran the section to the end of the war and beyond. The injunction that Mary Kitching should not write for other farm papers while organizing the *Journal's* women's section explains why 'Mary's At Home' was introduced. By making it more accessible to the potential readership among farmers and their families the Department brought the *Journal* into much closer competition with other farm papers. And those papers had women's sections.

TABLE 1
Content Analysis of Women's Section, *New Zealand Journal of Agriculture*.

| Year: | 1938 | | 1939 | | 1940 | | 1941 | | 1942 | | 1943 | | 1944 | | 1945 | |
|----------------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|--|
| Months: | 7-12 | 1-6 | 7-12 | 1-6 | 7-12 | 1-6 | 7-12 | 1-6 | 7-12 | 1-6 | 7-12 | 1-6 | 7-12 | 1-6 | 7-12 | |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | |
| Cookery, diet | 100.0 | 61.2 | 63.7 | 73.4 | 96.4 | 24.1 | 24.9 | 20.4 | 21.6 | 15.2 | 9.1 | 25.1 | 11.6 | 22.0 | 10.5 | |
| Household Management | | 31.7 | 22.8 | 6.5 | | 8.7 | 4.4 | 1.4 | 1.8 | 3.6 | 33.4 | 11.9 | 17.4 | 4.7 | 16.7 | |
| General features | | 6.1 | 13.5 | 15.0 | | 1.3 | 3.5 | 9.6 | 5.5 | 16.3 | 7.5 | 8.3 | 16.0 | 16.1 | 14.3 | |
| Fashion, beauty | | | | | | 15.0 | 13.9 | 3.0 | 7.8 | 1.4 | | 1.0 | 8.2 | 6.7 | 5.4 | |
| Moral homilies | | 1.0 | | 5.1 | 3.6 | 6.6 | 5.9 | 8.0 | 10.4 | 9.8 | 8.7 | 7.6 | 8.6 | 10.8 | 8.7 | |
| % Literature | | | | | | 16.0 | 7.9 | 2.8 | 2.7 | 5.8 | 4.1 | 8.8 | 14.9 | 9.4 | 10.4 | |
| Gardening | | | | | | | 5.8 | 15.8 | | | | | | | | |
| Readers' letters | | | | | | 9.2 | 13.6 | 17.5 | 20.7 | 13.9 | 14.8 | 11.7 | 4.4 | 10.2 | 14.8 | |
| Competition | | | | | | 19.1 | 20.1 | 21.5 | 29.5 | 34.0 | 22.3 | 25.6 | 18.9 | 20.1 | 19.2 | |
| Column cm | 1003 | 864 | 926 | 842 | 906 | 2363 | 2541 | 2103 | 1646 | 1868 | 1893 | 2061 | 3216 | 3865 | 4552 | |

Source: Calculated from data in New Zealand Journal of Agriculture, vols 56-70

Consider the *New Zealand Dairy Exporter*, on whose women's section the *Journal's* revamped women's section was consciously modelled. The *Exporter* was first published in July 1925 with a massive 65,000 print run; over 55,000 of these were sent free to every New Zealand dairy farmer by the publisher, the Dairy Export Board. In the first issue the Board declared that its objects were to make points of contact with three main classes:

1. The producer — the working dairy farmer and factory operatives.
2. The farmer's wife — to whose courage, home-making instincts, and assistance, the industry owes so much.
3. The business interests who serve the dairy world with farm and factory equipment and those that render service in the transport of, finance and sale of the manufactured goods.

For each of these classes the columns of the *Exporter* will make provision.³⁰

In the first issue the columns given over to the interests of the farmer's wife extended to no more than three pages, but this was doubled in the next issue. The farmer's wife was not satisfied: less than a year later an editorial noted:

The definite attention devoted to the home side of farm life has evoked most appreciative response. The women on the farm are playing a great part in national life, and are intensely interested, not only the financial success and betterment of their husbands' operations, but in the economical and reproductive expenditure of the farm income. This section will be enlarged as speedily as possible, because the mass of correspondence received from farm homes shows the hunger for consideration which this section of our paper is satisfying, and the opportunity presented for effective service in this field.³¹

Expansion came. By June 1938 'The Farm Home Journal: "Tui's"' Pages for the Countrywoman' comprised twenty three pages, and effectively was a fairly standard women's magazine of the time, stuck in the middle of a farming paper. The same was true of 'The Countrywoman at Home' in the commercially published *New Zealand Farmer*: the first weekly number of the *Farmer*, published on 3 March 1937, contained eleven pages for women with little attempt to connect the copy with farming.

Thus the Department of Agriculture was following a well-marked track in launching 'Mary's At Home' in the *Journal*. But why follow that track? A disinterested concern for the intellectual stimulation of New Zealand farm women? It would be nice to be able to think so, but the real answer is more sordid. In the June 1938 issue of the *Exporter* close to half the nominal space in the women's section was taken up by advertisements for clothes, patent medicines, consumer durables, contraceptive aids, cookery ingredients, beauty products and jewellery. This was not lost on competitors: as the *Journal's* editor reported to his Director-General, "The

30 *New Zealand Dairy Exporter*, Wellington, 25 July 1925, p.8.

31 *New Zealand Dairy Exporter*, 26 June 1926, p.27.

Exporter” runs a women’s section which from an advertising point of view is the backbone of the paper’.³² The same proved to be true of the *Journal*. When the Director-General invited his minister to double Enid Phillips’s monthly fee to £10, the principal argument was that ‘Mary’s At Home’ attracted, on average, seventy pounds in advertising revenue each month.³³

Commercial considerations might have underpinned the decision to reorganize the *Journal*’s women’s section, but that decision proved to have unforeseen consequences. The Director-General wrote in 1944 that ‘this section has become very popular with the reading public as evidenced by the growing number of letters received by the Lady Editor’.³⁴ Many of those letters were published, and frequently bore testimony to the support provided by ‘Mary’s At Home’ to lonely women in remote locations.³⁵ The same was true of the essay competitions. Each month’s *Journal* brought an extensive selection from the entries to the competition set two months previously. For anybody interested in how rural New Zealand women coped with wartime conditions these letters and competition entries (together with similar contributions to other farming papers) provide a goldmine of evidence that has yet to be explored.³⁶ As the war ended, reconstruction filled the frame: the competition for August 1945 was ‘In what way would you improve rural living?’ A typescript copy of the report on this competition was put in the hands of P. W. Smallfield, the director of the new Rural Development Division.³⁷

These letters and competition entries provided a conduit through which the Department’s senior male officers could learn, for the first time, how the mass of rural women felt about their life circumstances. The concerns expressed were not surprising: housing conditions, community facilities, schooling, their children’s future, the absence of husbands, sons, fathers. But the reiteration of these concerns, together with the remarkable upswelling of imaginative fortitude in facing difficulties, must have impressed these men as they browsed through the *Journal*’s women’s section month after month, year after year. The impression was deepened by a closer contact with the difficulties of rural women’s lives. This would have come from women’s deeper involvement in the productive sector of the rural economy: as herd testers, for instance.³⁸ But it also came more directly, through

32 Owen to Cockayne, 11 September 1940, Ag. 1953.

33 Fawcett to Roberts, 22 November 1944, Ag. 1953.

34 *ibid.*

35 See for example the letter from ‘Pet’, *New Zealand Journal of Agriculture*, LXVIII, 1944, p.471.

36 Particularly useful would be the competitions for January 1941 (‘Should girls leave home now and take up work in the city?’); September 1941 (‘What do you desire of life?’); July 1942 (‘Peace is declared’); September 1942 (‘My dream cowshed’); July 1943 (‘How hard are you working in the effort to win the war?’); and January 1944 (‘Courage to carry on’).

37 Metson to Smallfield, 25 October 1945, Ag. 1953.

38 B. L. Evans, *A History of Agricultural Production and Marketing in New Zealand*, Palmerston North, 1969, p.165.

departmental officers' experience in administering the Women's Land Service (W.L.S.)

The Women's Land Corps was established in 1940, modelled on the Women's Land Army in Britain. Reorganized as the W.L.S. in 1942,³⁹ its purpose was to supply women for general farm work, thus releasing men for active service. It led a sputtering existence, largely due to the government's decision not to declare agriculture an essential industry. This left the W.L.S. outside the main stream of wartime manpower direction, while making it subject to state control. The main controls specified wages and working conditions for skilled and for inexperienced workers, and limited W.L.S. labour to sheep and dairy farms.⁴⁰ Numbers built up quite quickly after the 1942 reorganization. By October 1943 the W.L.S. had placed 600 women on farms; by the following month this had increased to 1150, and the number peaked in September 1944 at 2088.⁴¹ After this date a growing flow of returning servicemen displaced W.L.S. women: in anticipation of this trend the National Service Department decreed in June 1944 that women working on the farms of their fathers or other near relatives could no longer belong to the W.L.S.⁴²

The W.L.S. formally was part of the Women's War Service Auxiliary, and thus was classified as voluntary work. Because of this, and its exclusion from manpower planning, until March 1944 W.L.S. women could not be assigned to farms through District Manpower Officers. A different route had to be used, through the Primary Industries Controller to the National Council of Primary Production, and then to District Councils of Primary Production (D.C.P.P.) who made the final allocation. This route was contained within the Department of Agriculture: the Primary Industries Controller was the Department's Director-General, E. J. Fawcett; the Secretary of the National Council was the director of the Fields Division, P. W. Smallfield; and the D.C.P.P.s comprised local Department officials and co-opted farmers. This brought senior officers, and Smallfield in particular, into close contact with some of the difficulties facing rural New Zealand women. Thus in January 1944 he had to deal with a complaint from a Wairarapa dairy farmer whose assigned W.L.S. worker, a city woman, had abandoned her place. He had been offered a Maori woman as a replacement, but she had not turned up. Smallfield's enquiries produced an account of the case from the National Service Department that laid bare the conditions in which some W.L.S. women were required to work (and which, presumably, were not unfamiliar to many rural women in

39 D. O. W. Hall, *Women at War*, Wellington, 1948, p.32.

40 Almost all women wanted to work on sheep farms. Recruits for dairy farms had to be positively encouraged: National Service Departmental Circular I.M. 118, 23 March 1944, paragraph 21, Ag. 2585, Government Archives, Wellington.

41 Anon., 'Solving the Farm Labour Problem', *New Zealand Journal of Agriculture*, LXVII (1943), pp.253-4; Smallfield to Secretaries of District Councils of Primary Production, 19 November 1943, Ag. 2585; Hall, p.32.

42 National Service Department Circular I.M. 132, 12 June 1944, paragraph 4, Ag. 2585.

peacetime), as well as exposing casual racism in upper echelons of the public service:

When Mr H lodged his application to employ a member of the Women's Land Service, the Secretary of the Wairarapa Primary Production Council reported that he was genuinely in need of help on the farm, and that Mr H is a very worthy farmer, but the living conditions were distinctly rough. The Secretary . . . further advised that unless it was possible to find a girl used to such conditions as obtained at H's, he was unable to recommend the application.

Despite this report a girl was placed there on 16 December 1943, but she only lasted a month and walked out and reported to this office that the job was too heavy and that the living conditions were impossible. It was thought that possibly a Maori girl would suit this farmer, and I have been in contact with two Maori applicants for the Land Service, but with their usual reliability, they have failed to answer correspondence.⁴³

Smallfield's subsequent enthusiasm for encouraging the rural sociologists in his post-war Rural Development Division to survey rural women's views directly suggests that he learnt a second thing through his involvement with the W.L.S.: the inherent class bias of the sole means the Department had previously used to collate women's opinions, namely the Dominion Executives of the Women's Division of Federated Farmers and the Women's Institutes. The W.D.F.F., in particular, had the reputation of being dominated by the wives of larger farmers. Hence the complaints raised before the war from squattocratic Canterbury: 'Besides being economic, the employment of contract labour on the farm and for cartage had the advantage of relieving the farmer's wife of much of the drudgery of preparing meals for labourers. She also had the use of electric stoves and other appliances. It was therefore paradoxical that in 1937 farmers' wives through their organisations in Ashburton and Methven made their strongest plea to the government for help in the home. They described in heart-rending terms the routine of the farmer's wife at harvest time.'⁴⁴ The rural problem as servant problem emerged several times in the brief history of the Department's involvement with the W.L.S. In January 1944 a regulation debarring land girls from having to undertake domestic duties 'met with staunch disapproval' at the Gore District Council of Primary Production; and in the same month the Wellington D.C.P.P., having asserted that the reason why so few W.L.S. women were on farms was the excessively high wages which farmers were forced by regulation to pay, proposed 'that the girls should be permitted to do two hours of domestic work daily. This would have the effect of avoiding the extra work which the present arrangement. . . involved upon the wives of farmers.'⁴⁵ Happily the National Council of Primary Production stood firm against this pressure,

43 Hunter to Smallfield, 24 January 1944, Ag. 2585.

44 W H. Scotter, *Ashburton: a History with Records of Town and Country*, Ashburton, 1972, p.269.

45 Wellington Primary Production Council to Smallfield, 28 January 1944, Ag. 2585.

but one imagines that the lesson was not lost on Percy Smallfield, a man summed up recently as 'intelligent, and a straight shooter'.⁴⁶

In January 1939 Violet Macmillan concluded her account of the origin and current activities of the A.C.E. with a battle-cry: 'The most important industry in New Zealand is the management of the New Zealand home!'⁴⁷ This aphorism summarized what Ann Gilchrist Strong had been arguing for two decades, that the maintenance and reproduction of the New Zealand farm family was as essential to an enhanced flow of export commodities as any technical innovation in grassland production or control of animal disease.⁴⁸ If it was true that 'it is the efficiency of the farmer's wife rather than that of the farmer which plays the bigger part in making life on the farm successful',⁴⁹ then it followed that New Zealand ignored the plight of rural women at the nation's economic peril.

Before the war this argument had not been accepted in official circles. Support for Strong's efforts came from an American trust rather than from the New Zealand government. But the home science extension work undertaken from Otago (and from Victoria under the privately-endowed Sarah Ann Rhodes Fellowship) showed that important work could be done among rural women. After a change of political colour the state eventually was convinced: Otago got its direct funding from 1940, and the National Council of Adult Education mounted a national home science extension scheme after 1945. Here we see yet one more example of the characteristic New Zealand method of introducing innovation in the broadly-defined social welfare field: resist state involvement until a programme is proven, then take it over directly or through subvention (as with the Plunket Society).⁵⁰

Wartime conditions broke down the comfortable division between a masculine productive sphere and a feminine reproductive sphere upon which pre-war arguments had rested. In agriculture, as in many other industries, women were seen to be managing quite competently work which had been believed to be 'man's work'. (Of course in agriculture many women always had taken a much more active role in production than the usual argument assumed, as Doig showed for dairy farming; but that was a separate matter). The point was driven home to staff in the Department of Agriculture through the remarkable success of the women's section of the *Journal* as a sounding board for the hopes, desires, fears and aspirations of New Zealand country women. In the clear, euphoric atmosphere of post-war reconstruction it seemed obvious that the Department could no longer

46 McLauchlan, p.103.

47 Macmillan, p.54.

48 P. W. Smallfield, *The Grasslands Revolution in New Zealand*, Auckland, 1970; McLauchlan, pp.110-16; G. McLauchlan, *The Farming of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1981, pp.198-9.

49 Macmillan, p.51.

50. E. Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', in W. H. Oliver, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Wellington, 1981, p.259.

serve an exclusively male clientele. Hence the Department's promotion of its own home science extension scheme after 1944.

But why call that scheme rural sociology? Two reasons. The first is that rural sociology had been oversold by Brunner and Kolb in the late 1930s, but that it was convenient for a politically influential group of men — the Shelley circle — that it should be believed that the discipline could deliver what it seemed to promise. And by 1944 members of the Shelley group had moved from provincial idealism in Christchurch to central control in Wellington, and had linked up with like-minded denizens of the capital. It would have been difficult to deny their definition of reality.

The second reason takes us beyond the confines of this paper. When the Rural Sociology Section was established in the new Rural Development Division, home science extension was to be but one of its functions. Reading the files makes it clear that the most important function was to be research into a vast array of demographic, sociological and sociographic features of rural New Zealand. An investigating officer in the Division obtained the best crash course available in American rural sociology, a Master's degree from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, J. H. Kolb's department. On his return he was put in charge of the Rural Sociology Section, with the clear expectation that he would drive forward the Section's research effort. He did nothing. Whether he did nothing because the internal departmental political climate had cooled, or because he was temperamentally unfitted to the research entrepreneurship that the job required, or because the other home science-trained rural sociologists had developed a trained incapacity for sociological research in their years at Otago remains a matter for argument and speculation. What cannot be denied is that Smallfield was unlucky in 1944. After the events of the 1930s it must have seemed a good bet that valuable rural sociology could be done in New Zealand, and that it could connect with and enrich a home science extension scheme. That none of this happened could not be laid at his door.

The final point concerns connections across national frontiers. The story unfolded here was shaped fundamentally by Carnegie money. Funds from that Scottish-turned-American grasping-ironmaster-turned-philanthropist introduced two American ideas to New Zealand. One, home science, rooted in the alien soil. Indeed, it could be argued that, like many introduced plants, it flourished much too strongly here, for the absence of predators allowed it to reproduce its form unchanged down to the present day. In the United States, by contrast, home science mutated into home economics and child psychology.⁵¹ The second idea, rural sociology, failed to take root. Partly this was the result of the adventitious factors listed above. But partly it was because Brunner and Kolb presented a discipline

51 Carnegie money had an important influence in other aspects of New Zealand life, of course. Best known is the Trust's support for public libraries. Less well known, but still very significant, was its support for university libraries: K. Sinclair, *A History of the University of Auckland, 1883-1983*, Auckland, 1983, p.205.

which had developed under very specific historical and political circumstances in the land grant colleges of late nineteenth-century America⁵² as a technical solution for any rural sector at any time in any country. New Zealand learned in the 1940s what the Third World was to learn in the 1970s as the Green Revolution (socially, American rural sociology exported on a world scale) crashed under the weight of its own contradictions: in social life there are no technical solutions, only political solutions.

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52 E. de S. Brunner, *The Growth of a Science: Fifty Years of Rural Sociological Research in the United States*, New York, 1957; L. Nelson, *Rural Sociology: its Origin and Growth in the United States*, Minneapolis, 1969.