

Which Barrier Was Broken?

BROKEN BARRIER AND NEW ZEALAND CINEMA IN THE 1950s¹



AFTER THE 1952 RELEASE OF *BROKEN BARRIER*, a New Zealand-made film about the romance between a Maori woman and a Pakeha man, a commentator defended the depiction of the Pakeha family who disapproved of their son wanting to marry a Maori woman by saying that the film ‘wasn’t made in Hollywood. It was made for adults by adults. It’s about the way things really do happen.’² Although not made in Hollywood, *Broken Barrier* was very much influenced by the tide of American cinema and theatre current at the time. *Broken Barrier* both reinforces Miles Fairburn’s recent argument about the influence of American culture in New Zealand and provides a counter to his view that New Zealand has had a history of unexceptional race relations.³ The film can help us to understand the porous nature of cultural production in the early 1950s and to locate a significant development in New Zealand cinema history within it. *Broken Barrier* was, in part, an outgrowth of a genre of ‘social problem’ film-making dominating Hollywood in the late 1940s.⁴ That it received a mixed reception indicates that the theme of intermarriage, chosen to highlight tensions in Maori–Pakeha relations, owed more to a genre than to a pressing social problem.

New Zealand historians have paid little attention to the history of feature films beyond noting that New Zealanders were avid filmgoers.⁵ Although film, like literature, requires a mode of analysis different from that usually employed by historians, those interested in New Zealand’s cultural history are likely to be rewarded by a more thorough engagement with what New Zealanders saw on screen. As Simon Sigley has shown in his recent work, film raises issues of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, censorship and politics.⁶ Taking up Sigley’s point that ‘films were not merely rarefied aesthetic objects but points of entry into a society or culture at a particular moment in history’,⁷ and using *Broken Barrier* as the point of entry, this article explores facets of New Zealand society in the early 1950s, from the local consumption of Hollywood film fare, to the distinctiveness of the film’s plot, and the difficulty of producing feature films in New Zealand. *Broken Barrier* was a local response to the possibilities that cinema offered for visualizing racial difference. How the film was received suggests that the plot device was less effective than the local settings.

In his 1945 book *Speaking Candidly*, Gordon Mirams noted that there was ‘one theatre seat to every six persons’ in New Zealand. While American patronage of the movies may have been higher, New Zealand was better provided with cinemas. In the United States there was one movie theatre for every 8700 persons; in New Zealand there was one for every 3000.⁸ New Zealand and Australia were reputed to be second behind Great Britain as the biggest market for Hollywood films.

Actors Bob Hope and Greer Garson were household names in the years of the Second World War, thanks to their prominence on New Zealand screens.⁹ As the numbers of American servicemen within New Zealand swelled during the war, so too did the popularity of Hollywood.



Figure 1: Publicity still for *Broken Barrier* (1952), A Pacific Films Production, Produced and Directed by Roger Mirams & John O’Shea. Pacific Films Collection, New Zealand Film Archive Ngā Kaitiaki O Ngā Taonga Whitiāhua.

In the most comprehensive discussion contextualizing *Broken Barrier*, the only major feature film made by New Zealanders between 1940 and 1964, Laurence Simmons wrote that the film ‘belongs to and was partially inspired by, or was a response to, a long tradition of representation of the Maori in New Zealand film’.¹⁰ Simmons regarded the exploration of the theme of intermarriage as unusual and courageous.¹¹ Similarly, in his study of Maori in film and television, Martin Blythe wrote about *Broken Barrier* in terms of the film’s role in promoting the myth of integration in New Zealand.¹² Both authors illuminated the relationship between the film and the domestic context, helping to build a genealogy for New Zealand cinema. But if the lens is widened away from New Zealand’s national history of film-making, other important transnational influences can be seen in the genesis of *Broken Barrier*. While in the project of developing an understanding of national cinema film scholars have been eager to ask what makes a New Zealand film distinctive, the aim here is to ask how we might understand *Broken Barrier* if it is viewed as part of an international genre of ‘social problem’ theatre and film-making, one with which its originators were deeply engaged. Through *Broken Barrier* we can see how these concerns become localized and how New Zealand material was made to speak to the international concerns of the genre. The second aim of this article is to ‘follow the money’ and see what that tells us about this film.¹³ By remapping the context of *Broken Barrier* the history of New Zealand cinema can be remade.

Roger Mirams and John O’Shea together produced *Broken Barrier*. Mirams produced his first film, *When the Gangsters came to Christchurch*, at the age of 13 and created his first production company at the age of 20, in 1938.¹⁴ O’Shea trained as an historian. Both served in World War II in the Italian campaign, Mirams

as a war correspondent and cameraman. Their wartime experience heightened their appreciation of the politics of race within New Zealand society.¹⁵ The ex-servicemen continued viewing the world on their return home. O'Shea wrote: 'If ever people want to know about the war in Europe, I can think of no better way to acquaint them with it than seeing *The Conformist* by Bertolucci or Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero*'.¹⁶ Both men were passionately interested in feature films.

At the time of *Broken Barrier*'s release, O'Shea was asked about his purpose in making the film. He replied, first 'entertainment', and second 'to show the reactions to a marriage between a Maori and a Pakeha in a country which prides itself on its lack of prejudice'.¹⁷ Entertainment was the driving force: Mirams and O'Shea wanted to make a film that by having good box office sales would repay their investment. In particular, if they could sell the film abroad, they could make enough to go on being feature filmmakers.

In the late 1940s, John O'Shea was the editor of the *Monthly Film Bulletin* of the Wellington Film Society, which had been resurrected in December 1945.¹⁸ The members of the society eagerly awaited French, Italian, Polish, Australian, Dutch and American feature films and documentaries. On 1 December 1949, O'Shea advised readers in the 'What's Coming' column to watch out for 'Three films combating anti-Negro prejudice', noting that the films had been 'favourably received'.¹⁹ The films were *Pinky*, *Home of the Brave* and *Lost Boundaries*. In the words of one New Zealand newspaper, 1950 was 'something of a vintage year for film fare', given 'Hollywood's sudden absorption with the formerly untouchable Negro problem'.²⁰ No doubt Mirams and O'Shea would have been aware of the success of all of these films.²¹

As young men (both in their early 30s) avidly interested in film, Mirams and O'Shea probably read whatever was available on the 'anti-Negro prejudice' genre, including the British Film Institute's *Monthly Film Bulletin*. In November 1949 the *Bulletin* noted that '*The Crossfire-Gentleman's Agreement* (films about anti-semitism) cycle has now passed, and the negro problem occupies "advanced" film-makers in Hollywood'.²² *Variety*, that 'must-read' for all interested in the entertainment world, commented in the same month that 'Films' leading star for 1949 was not a personality, but subject matter. And a subject — racial prejudice — that until very recently was tabu [sic]. The Hollywood 'Negro-Tolerance Pix' had achieved a \$20 million box office payoff.²³ These films, wrote Ralph Ellison in 1949, despite their 'absurdities' were 'all worth seeing'. That they succeeded at an emotional level, he noted, 'is testimony to the deep centers of American emotion that they touch'.²⁴

Mirams and O'Shea admired Italian film and the neorealism that promoted 'on-location shooting, the use of non-professional actors, and improvisation of script'.²⁵ European Neorealists turned their backs on the artifice of the studio and sought real locations and real people.²⁶ New Zealand had no big studio for aspiring filmmakers to reject.²⁷ The place with the most resources, the National Film Unit (NFU), employed Mirams after the war. It was the one place where a cameraman could make a living. While at the NFU Mirams wanted to make a film on Maori and had shot footage of 'Maori celebrations thinking it might end up with a 20-minute documentary on the Maori'.²⁸

In late 1947, Mirams left the National Film Unit and formed the independent

Pacific Film Unit with a former NFU colleague, Alun Falconer. They became freelance New Zealand representatives for Fox-Movietone News, which was based in Australia. The company lent them new equipment and let them use it for any work they undertook.²⁹ Mirams and Falconer approached the Rehabilitation Department for a loan of £1500 'to float a small public company' but were refused. They could get no government work because of the monopoly exercised by the NFU. *Truth* publicized Mirams's plight (Falconer went to China), seeing it as an indication of the lengths to which 'the State will go to preserve its monopolies'. The paper also accused the government of renegeing on its promise 'to smooth the track from service life to business street'.³⁰

An important external impetus to the making of *Broken Barrier* came via Gordon Mirams, author of *Speaking Candidly*, the Dominion film censor and Roger's brother. Gordon Mirams had worked with the film division of the information section of UNESCO in Paris after the war. At UNESCO fellow workers expressed enthusiasm for a film about New Zealand race relations, and Gordon Mirams urged his film-making brother to consider this topic.³¹ Gordon Mirams was also aware of the criticism made by the foremost British documentary maker, John Grierson, that New Zealand film was full of images of the land, sheep and butter and 'of Maoris who staged shows for rich tourists' but never of the daily life of the people.³² When, sometime in the first half of 1950, Roger Mirams met up with John O'Shea, they discussed the possibility of a film over lunch. 'The following day', according to Mirams, 'O'Shea had written the first draft of the story'.³³

As O'Shea worked on his draft, New Zealand critics and audiences continued to grapple with American films that dealt directly with the question of race. On 3 March 1950, the *New Zealand Listener's* film critic 'Jno' (disliked by O'Shea for his lack of attention to the visual qualities of films³⁴) reviewed *Pinky*, 'Darryl Zanuck's latest social problem picture'. The reviewer described it as 'a film of good intentions'. It was 'an advance on *Gentleman's Agreement* — it has a far more explosive theme In a sense, too, it is an improvement on *Home of the Brave* . . . since it provides a simpler and more comprehensible statement of the Negro problem'. Yet, according to the critic, the film achieved 'only an indifferent measure of success'. The review concluded: 'I was disappointed by the timidity of the studio in the so artfully contrived happy ending. In other words, I'm still waiting for a film on race prejudice that pulls no punches, but no doubt it will come if we are patient enough.'³⁵

Home of the Brave, the film that 'launched Hollywood's cycle of problem pictures in the late 1940s',³⁶ was received in New Zealand as 'a terse, modern allegory' and 'recommended as good adult entertainment'.³⁷ The film adapted a successful Broadway play by Arthur Laurents by substituting what was then called a 'Negro' character for the Jewish protagonist. A young 'Negro' private, Peter Moss, breaks down and in doing so indicates the way that racism had wounded him. Made independently by Stanley Kramer, the film 'was shot on a shoe string budget and without big name stars'. 'The film's release caught the movie industry and the critics off guard. It was a commercial and critical success, proving that audiences then were ready for a new type of black film and black character.'³⁸

Lost Boundaries, another of the Hollywood cycle, and also well received in New Zealand, was made by Louis de Rochemont, who was determined 'to prove that true life stories and location shooting were ultimately more realistic

than sound stage work'.³⁹ 'Based loosely on a true story', the film is a story of a young couple, 'both with negro blood', who settle in a New Hampshire town and pass as whites until their true identity is revealed after 20 years. Bosley Crowther, *New York Times* critic, wrote of *Lost Boundaries* that the 'statement of the anguish and ironies of racial taboo is clear, eloquent and moving'.⁴⁰

The success of all these films suggested that race 'problem' films made popular entertainment, the first of O'Shea's stated reasons for making *Broken Barrier*.⁴¹ The second reason he gave was to shake New Zealand's complacency about being a country without racial prejudice.

The social context in America was, of course, very different from that of New Zealand. There was no legal segregation between Maori and Pakeha and there had never been any anti-miscegenation laws. This made for a distinctive history of racial contact. Rates of intermarriage were comparatively high.⁴² Maori, unlike Australian Aboriginal people, were citizens. Nor were depictions of cross-cultural relationships formally policed. There was no equivalent to the American Production Code where miscegenation on screen was prohibited from the 1920s until 1954.⁴³ Various American states prohibited marriage between African Americans, Asians and Native Americans. Idaho did not repeal its ban on Native American white marriages until 1959.⁴⁴ If there was any national objection to 'race mixing' in New Zealand, it was, as was common elsewhere, to marriages between Maori and Chinese; prominent Maori and Pakeha saw such marriages as leading to a 'degradation of the race'.⁴⁵

The years of World War II and after saw increased rates of Maori urbanization. Maori and Pakeha now had to confront new expectations of each other, sometimes at a distance and sometimes in intimate relationships. The tremendous bravery of the Maori battalion in the war had reinforced the view that Maori and Pakeha were New Zealanders together, but Maori were sometimes made unwelcome in places in their own country.⁴⁶ In the same year that *Broken Barrier* was released, *Te Ao Hou* was launched by the Department of Maori Affairs. Intended as a magazine for Maori to keep them informed of events in communities and of the work of relevant government departments, it was an important initiative as the pace of Maori urbanization quickened. Also in 1952 a series of talks on Maori-Pakeha relations was broadcast on radio.⁴⁷ In local North Island theatres, the drama club of Ardmore Teachers' College toured a production of *Deep are the Roots*, the successful Broadway play about American racial prejudice written by Arnaud D'Usseau and James Gow. Miscegenation was a key part of the play.⁴⁸

New Zealand cinemas at this time were dominated by tales from abroad. Maori, and Pakeha New Zealanders for that matter, were absent from the feature films on screen. Cinema as entertainment came from outside the country.⁴⁹ The NFU sought to overcome this deficiency through locally made films, usually documentaries, which showed New Zealanders to themselves, beginning with the *Weekly Review* in 1941. A decade later, Michael Furlong made *Aroha*, a film that used fiction to promote integration and persuade Maori to abandon tohunga and to use modern medicine.⁵⁰ *Aroha*, the title character, lived in a Maori girls' hostel, enjoyed herself at university, and was sought after by Pakeha boys. Her hostel friends accused her of becoming a 'white Maori'. *Aroha* went against the wishes of her elders in insisting that her father be taken to hospital, where he recovered from his life-threatening illness. An advocate of modernity in this sense, she also

upheld tradition by eventually choosing to marry a Maori man from her community. ‘We have so much that is good of the Pakeha world’, she concluded, ‘and so much that is good of our own’. Another notable example of the NFU’s work was the health education film *Tuberculosis and the Maori People of the Wairoa District* — made in cooperation with the Ngati Kahungunu people — and released in the same year as *Broken Barrier*.⁵¹

The NFU clearly had no difficulty working with Maori communities and was keen to use film for educational purposes. But Mirams and O’Shea were critical of both the monopoly and the propaganda purposes of the unit. Mirams claimed a film on race relations ‘was too controversial’ for the government unit.⁵² ‘Why is it’, O’Shea asked in 1952, ‘that a film about the Maoris, other than sweet sugar and spice and tourist come-ons, has never been made before?’ He blamed the government, ‘the dead hand that was laid on even the slightest criticisms of New Zealand life, the fear of saying anything other than “Look – ain’t we wonderful?”’⁵³

One intent of Mirams and O’Shea’s film was, according to Mirams, to educate Pakeha, especially those ‘in the South Island’ who ‘might not have the same knowledge of the race-relationship problems which existed between Maori and pakeha [sic] in the north’.⁵⁴ That the device for the discussion of the problem became intermarriage was, I suggest, due to Hollywood. The impact of American film on the local climate of opinion should not be underestimated.

Pinky, a Twentieth-Century Fox film, was a great success in New Zealand. The *Evening Star* described it as ‘a sincere and compelling film, brilliantly acted’.⁵⁵ Jeanne Crain played Pinky, so named because of her white complexion. The film told the story of a light-skinned black woman in the southern United States who went north to be trained as a nurse. (In fact the actress was white, in order not to contravene the American Production Code’s rules against miscegenation). Her washerwoman grandmother had scrimped and saved to support her. Pinky passed as white, fell in love with a white doctor named Tom, who did not know her origins, and then fled home when he suggested marriage. Back home she nursed the plantation owner, Miss Em, to repay a debt for her grandmother. Miss Em counselled Pinky to always be herself.

In many ways *Pinky* is a film about women’s independence as well as race. Pinky refused Tom’s offer to go away, forget her past and begin a new life with him. Instead she sought to make good the challenge made to her by Miss Em — the plantation owner who willed Pinky her property — by putting her inheritance to good use. She used the building and her training to run a nursery school and a clinic for her own people. This was the ‘happy ending’ (ironically the rejection of romance) which the *Listener* reviewer saw as a failure.⁵⁶

Broken Barrier is also about a young woman sent away to predominantly white society to become a nurse whose mother worries about how ‘living and working in a city has changed her’. In the case of *Broken Barrier*, however, a young Pakeha man also named Tom (played by Terence Bayler) found Rawi (played by Kay Ngarimu) not in the city but in Mahia, on the east coast of the North Island, where he was employed for a time on the family farm. They met on her ground, where he was the outsider. Rawi’s mother, noticing the attraction between the two, saw that Tom was tested on the marae at a Maori gathering. Tom enjoyed

the easy hospitality of the family and openness of relations between the sexes which seemed more informal than in Pakeha society, but decided that 'falling for a native girl is much too complicated'. Rawi went back to Wellington hospital and eventually Tom followed her. He took Rawi to meet his snobbish, well-heeled family, who clearly disapproved of her. Rawi supposed that Tom's father thought that marrying 'a Maori girl would bring bad blood into the family'. The film then cut to a scene of Rawi sorting blood samples in the hospital, a scene reminiscent of one in *Lost Boundaries*.

Tom, in fact, was not what he seemed. He was a journalist, seeking stories about Maori society for an American magazine (perhaps a reference to the 1948 film *Gentleman's Agreement*, in which Gregory Peck masqueraded as a Jew in order to write articles about anti-Semitism). Tom hoped 'to soak up enough native colour for a dozen articles'.⁵⁷ Rawi left Tom when she found he had been writing articles about 'Savage Maori and Cannibalism'. She went home, realizing that her own people needed her nursing help. Tom took a job in the forestry service and became friends with Johnny (played by Bill Merito), a Maori workmate: 'this time it's the white man learning from the brown'.⁵⁸ Such interracial friendship, causing white characters to become more tolerant, was a frequent motif in social problem films.⁵⁹ After hearing about Tom's relationship with Rawi, Johnny advised Tom that 'the light and the dark can always be together'.⁶⁰ After an unlikely event involving Johnny sacrificing his life to save Tom in a forest fire, Tom sought Rawi out, all was forgiven and it seemed they would marry and begin a life together in Mahia.

Pinky and *Broken Barrier* told different stories about very different societies. They were both concerned, however, with romance across race and its implications, and they both engaged in denial.⁶¹ Pinky's parents remained unmentioned in the film (just the fact that her mother was dead). Rawi's father, Alec (played by George Ormond), was acknowledged to be half European 'but all Maori when it comes to hospitality'. It was her Maori mother Kiri (played by Mira Hape), however, who was given voice in the film. Both Pinky and Rawi themselves came from mixed parentage, yet the idea that they themselves might enter such relationships was made the central problem of both films.

The 'epidermal system of the film text' was at play in *Broken Barrier* as it was in *Pinky*.⁶² In casting for *Broken Barrier*, Mirams and O'Shea had hoped to find a blonde Pakeha male for the lead role to contrast with Kay Ngarimu. Ngarimu's 'very fine features' made her an obvious choice for the film. When Mirams met up with Terence Bayler, he told him he was unsuitable because of his dark features and dark hair. Bayler immediately offered to peroxide his hair, so keen was he to get the part. This endeared him to Mirams and, in the end, Mirams and O'Shea decided to make Tom of Irish extraction to explain Bayler's colouring.⁶³

Transgressive romance was used in both *Pinky* and *Broken Barrier* as a 'vehicle for social critique'.⁶⁴ As she realized she was falling for Tom, Rawi thought about how, when she was young, 'I never had any worries about colour'. She continued: 'The law in this country says our colour doesn't bar us from anything — we can become whatever we like — but there is nothing in the rules about falling in love.'⁶⁵ In *Broken Barrier* Rawi and Tom's relationship was said to 'help overcome the barrier of race prejudice that time has placed between them'.⁶⁶

In the case of *Pinky* her romance would lead to her becoming someone else, in her boyfriend's words, 'there'll be no Pinky Johnson after we're married. You'll be

Mrs Thomas Adams for the rest of your life.’ Pinky replied, ‘Tom, you can change your name, but I wonder if you can really change what you are, inside’. In the end she rejected Tom and accepted her grandmother and Miss Em’s advice — to be true to who you are. Romance would have remade Pinky into a white woman, a choice she rejected to embrace the fact, as she said, ‘I’m a Negro . . . I don’t want to be anything else’.

Broken Barrier suggested that Tom, in fact, would become ‘Maori’, and would be easily accepted into Rawi’s community. Love made him re-evaluate his life; he would give up writing articles about ‘primitive peoples’, an occupation which he came to find distasteful. Tom would, like generations before him in New Zealand, marry into a Maori family. Rawi too re-evaluated her goals. She left the city — home of Pakeha values — and returned to Mahia to assist her own community. The phrase ‘the future lies with them’ was also said in Maori. The film ended with the text on screen of a sentence from the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights, Paris, 1948: ‘There shall be no discrimination on the grounds of race or colour.’

Pinky had high production values, stars in the leading roles and dialogue.⁶⁷ *Broken Barrier* was made in Mahia and other North Island locations and, because of cost and a lack of technology, had voice-over commentary rather than spoken dialogue. It was made on a shoe-string budget (financed by Mirams and O’Shea themselves, with some help from Edith and Richard Campion), relied on Kiwi ingenuity and, apart from the leading actors, used local people willing to take part.

Mirams claimed that ‘local subject and settings’ were ‘essential for [the] success of the film’. He commented: ‘The time is long past when local audiences would accept any film simply because it has been locally made. That is a very good thing, but it means that any films which are made here now must measure up to the imported products in technical standard and entertainment value . . . film making is an expensive and speculative business.’⁶⁸ Mirams was clearly pleading for financial support for the making of films, but there was no response, apart from the socialist *People’s Voice* which promised that ‘Under a People’s Government the production of full-length films would be a regular feature in New Zealand.’⁶⁹

The financial success of *Broken Barrier* depended greatly on overseas success, ‘for that is where the profits must come from’.⁷⁰ The makers avoided use of the word ‘Pakeha’ in the film since they were aware it would not be understood overseas.⁷¹ Although Mirams and O’Shea had wanted to undermine the ‘grass-skirt-cum-Rotorua conception’ of Maori so often exported overseas, in filming they could not resist displaying thermal wonders and Maori uniqueness.⁷² The pamphlet promoting the film in London highlighted ‘The strange Maori arts, folklore and war chants (“hakas”), the background to a modern, absorbing love story. One of the world’s greatest scenic attractions — the uncanny thermal regions of Rotorua, with their boiling mud-pools and gushing geysers.’⁷³ One report of the trade showing in London that preceded the New Zealand launch was dispiriting. The film was labelled a ‘Racial problem drama’ with appeal ‘to unsophisticated audiences. Rather slow-moving and unexciting romantic drama.’⁷⁴ No note of this reached the New Zealand public, who were told that the film had been well received in England ‘as an authentic picture of New Zealand life’. Copies were said to be sent to Paris and New York.⁷⁵

Broken Barrier, advertised as ‘New Zealand’s First World Standard Film’, had its ‘Gala World Premier’ at the Regent Theatre in Wellington on Thursday, 10 July 1952. The night, replete with floodlights, bunting, flowers, marching girls, the Port Nicholson silver band and dignitaries filmed on arrival, had, the *Dominion* noted, all the features of first film nights ‘in America’s movieland capital’.⁷⁶ The fashions worn by the wives of the mayor, the governor-general and the producers were described in the women’s page of the newspaper.⁷⁷ The *Dominion* concluded: ‘There are faults in “Broken Barrier” but there are many virtues. Certainly it may be said that here is a processed product other than food which really deserves that ubiquitous commendation, “Well made New Zealand”’.⁷⁸

Conscious of their debt to the local community, the makers held the next gala opening the following Monday at Gisborne’s Regent Theatre. Coloured lights, palms, flowers and foliage decorated the theatre, and the festive mood was heightened by the Gisborne Highland Pipe band, two teams of marching girls and a flashlight photographer. ‘Murmurs of recognition, amusement and surprise, were heard during many of the locally-shot scenes’, which were judged to be ‘convincingly natural’. The local reviewer found the ‘thought dialogue’ soundtrack, although unusual, effective for getting inside the heads of the characters. If this was ‘the first “child” of Pacific Films’ then with “brothers and sisters” there would be a very fine family indeed for the New Zealand feature film industry’.⁷⁹

The public seemed to agree with the local reviewers. Over 12,000 people saw the film in its first week. It was Kerridge’s box office leader of the month.⁸⁰ *Broken Barrier* did particularly well on the East Coast and in Hawke’s Bay, where the patrons knew the locality and the extras; hence it had particular appeal to Maori audiences in those areas. In Opotiki, the manager of the Regent Theatre painted a lavish display for the theatre, including a Maori carving, a meeting house and bush scenes. The Whakatohea Maori Youth Club sent ‘two Maori maidens in full costume each night’ to hand out give-away photos of the stars.⁸¹ At the Auckland premier, a friend wrote to John O’Shea, ‘It wd.[sic] have delighted you the way the Maoris picked up every point with glee. The comments around me showed that you have hit reality hard, and that the film is absolutely, genuinely, “of this land”’.⁸²



Figure 2: Local businesses on the East Coast promoted the film vigorously. *Broken Barrier* Farmers Trading Co. window display, Opotiki, [1952]. Pacific Films Collection, New Zealand Film Archive Ngā Kaitiaki O Ngā Taonga Whitiāhua.

Mirams and O'Shea covered every possible publicity angle as they promoted the film. To attract the readers of the *Dairy Exporter* they highlighted the 'many farming sequences' in the film.⁸³ In the *RSA Review* they stressed that Kay Ngarimu was the sister of the winner of the Victoria Cross, and that the film was produced by two ex-servicemen.⁸⁴ They were interviewed on radio by Aunt Daisy and Elsie Lloyd, and made a publicity programme with a Miss McMillan.⁸⁵ In a speech to the Wairoa Rotary club, they emphasized that they had set out to make an entertaining film about life in New Zealand which showed 'the way people think about each other not about such usual ingredients as bashings and shootings-ups'. To that audience, they concluded, 'Really, of course, the most remarkable thing about life here in New Zealand is the harmony that exists between the two races.'⁸⁶

There was no doubt that the local audiences enjoyed seeing New Zealand on screen. One farming family, having 'never seen a motion picture', made a special effort to go to *Broken Barrier* at the Meteor theatre in Palmerston North 'because it was a New Zealand film'.⁸⁷ The Christchurch *Star* hailed the film as a 'remarkable achievement' which provided 'a warm and ironic commentary' on the couple's situation.⁸⁸ Many reviewers praised the honesty and unpretentiousness of the film: 'A Maori timber worker's reaction to a bush fire — "What's all the panic about, eh?" — spoken as only a Maori timber worker could speak it; a group drinking beer outside a country dance hall . . . Real characters, situations and scenes filmed as they occur only in New Zealand — they are the down-to-earth material from which the Dominion's first fiction motion picture was made.'⁸⁹

Reviewers in Wellington's *Dominion* and Auckland's *Herald* found the absence of direct dialogue a deficit. The film's pictorial qualities, though, were said to outweigh a 'number of handicaps which the film has in comparison with the imported product'.⁹⁰ The most telling criticism, however, was made in *Landfall* by Margaret Dunningham, a Dunedin-based art historian. Recognizing the producer's hopes that the film would appeal to an overseas market, she noted that 'The offence of *Broken Barrier*' was the same as those articles about 'exotic savages' that the hero Tom was writing for American papers. It suggested that intermarriage was a national problem when, in fact, Dunningham stated, 'we have sufficient examples amongst us to know it can be carried off successfully'.⁹¹ In *Here & Now*, critic H.W. Gretton wrote that 'Unfortunately, overseas audiences will now see [Maori] through the eyes of that incredible journalist, Rawi's boy-friend, and say afterwards "the New Zealanders are educating their natives, even marrying them — the pretty ones. How enlightened New Zealanders must be!"' This, he felt, was 'rotten propaganda'. 'Tomorrow morning, when your tram ticket is punched by the same Maori clippie you meet every day, and you don't turn up your European nose at her, then you have the authority of the film for feeling enlightened, and much superior to Rawi's in-laws.'⁹²

Despite doing little to address the everyday problems of prejudice that existed in New Zealand, the box office success of *Broken Barrier*, according to Gretton, showed that New Zealanders were 'really hungry' for films about their own country. He urged Mirams and O'Shea to produce another film about New Zealand, showing a community 'where brown and white work together daily without any question of a colour bar'.⁹³ However, in late 1952 the duo were considering following up

Broken Barrier with a 'slightly more elaborate film' about James Brydone, the man responsible for 'the first shipment of frozen meat from the Dominion'.⁹⁴ It was unlikely, Mirams said, 'that they would attempt another on race relations'.⁹⁵

Mirams and O'Shea had hoped that *Broken Barrier* might be picked up internationally. A visit from American film producer Spyros Skouras seemed promising. Skouras judged the film to be a 'good feature effort' and cabled his London representatives to seek possibilities of screenings in other parts of the world.⁹⁶ Kerridge-Odeon did well out of the film, 'but on tough terms that left little economic reward for the pioneering producers who had sunk just about everything they had into it'.⁹⁷ There was no financial return from London. By January 1953, Mirams and O'Shea had 'only got a little over half' of their own money back which meant, O'Shea wrote to Bayler, that they had 'spent many spare moments feeding the wolves at our respective doors a little bone to see them quiet until we are in the clear'. He thought they would have recovered their production costs by the end of 1953.⁹⁸ No further feature films eventuated that decade. Mirams moved to Melbourne in 1957 and achieved success in 1960 with an action adventure series in which children were heroes; he eventually teamed up with Paramount.⁹⁹ O'Shea remained in New Zealand and eventually became central to the creation of further New Zealand-made films.¹⁰⁰

The title and subject of *Broken Barrier* suggested that the barrier that was broken was between the races. And this is the way, using Paul Clark's insight, 'it had shaped historical memory'.¹⁰¹ It has been taken by some to represent things 'as they were' rather than as fiction. But Mirams and O'Shea were interested in breaking more than racial barriers. They wanted to make a New Zealand feature film that did well at the box office and made an impression on the international scene. The popularity of *Pinky* and the rest of the cycle of racial 'problem' films indicated that audiences were ready for such fare. The interest from UNESCO was another international impetus. The 'barrier' of interracial romance portrayed within the film was a device to seek an audience. This is not to suggest that Mirams and O'Shea were cynical in the making of their film. Rather, encouraged by the success of American films that raised the issue of racial prejudice, they looked afresh at New Zealand and decided that such a New Zealand story might be timely. Using the big screen to explore issues of racial tension was a departure from the good news stories of the National Film Unit.

In a way the film succeeded in spite of its romantic theme, which many of its critics found to be contrived. As H.W. Gretton wrote, 'the only time we feel sorry for Rawi is at the end, when she looks like marrying her fool pakeha'.¹⁰² It was hard to find anything admirable in the character of Tom. What audiences particularly enjoyed was seeing New Zealand in a feature film, but even then the film was found wanting in light of the usual Hollywood fare.

In 1955, *Broken Barrier* was reissued. Two Wellingtonians, Noel Hilliard and Kiriwai Mete, went to see the film at the Paramount and decided to write to O'Shea with their criticisms. 'We have', they wrote, 'had to face and resolve the problem of a "mixed" marriage and have some understanding of the issues involved'. The letter, which O'Shea took to heart, pointed out that the film was not about conflict between the couple on the grounds of race, but a misunderstanding over Tom's intentions when his publisher's letter was discovered: 'The fact is that once the

two went overboard for each other the issue of prejudice was stone dead and of no dramatic significance thereafter.' It was really Rawi, the couple contended, that the film should have followed since she had to look at things from a new angle. Instead, she accepted Tom back 'as if nothing had happened'. 'The real weakness', they continued, was that O'Shea 'chose characters far from typical'. They liked the way discrimination was depicted — 'the snubs on the street and at the boy's parents' home' — but felt that their inclusion contributed nothing 'to solving the problems they posed'. And although there was dialogue about 'Maoris being used as tourist attractions', 'the makers of the film were themselves not indifferent towards the sales value of Maori picturesqueness on the overseas market'. The couple concluded: 'The film seems intended to sell New Zealand racial "tolerance" abroad like butter and frozen meat. We think it is a false picture of race relations here as they really are. In our view the film uses phony methods to get a phony message across.'¹⁰³

In suggesting that O'Shea would have done better to follow Rawi's story, the Hilliards were perhaps pointing to a particular feature of race relations in New Zealand: Maori women may have lost social status in their own community by marrying Pakeha men.¹⁰⁴ In his study of mixed marriage, John Harre found amongst his informants who had married before World War Two, Maori parents were likely to object to such unions.¹⁰⁵ A film which traced Rawi's family's reaction to the knowledge that the young man they had befriended had abused their hospitality would have told a very different story about New Zealand race relations. How would audiences have reacted to the questions put by elders to one young Maori woman: 'Who is this Pakeha you are going to marry? He is nothing. He has no ancestors, nor a canoe. He owns no land. He has no roots, no background. Who is this Pakeha?'¹⁰⁶

Rawi's perspective, and that of her family, was lost in the course of the film. Russell Campbell has pointed out how quickly the narrative centred on Tom rather than on any of the Maori characters.¹⁰⁷ No indication was given as to why Rawi might have changed her mind about her unworthy suitor. Martin Blythe suggested that the narrative drive was towards integration, 'where the racism of the Pakeha and the simple life of the Maori have passed away through intermarriage'.¹⁰⁸

When a release print of *Broken Barrier* was laboriously recreated in the 1980s, the film was seen in a new light and hailed as a 'remarkable achievement in consciousness raising in New Zealand'.¹⁰⁹ Since then it has been rehabilitated as a significant development in the country's national cinema, which indeed it was. Its significance, however, lies not so much in the subject matter of intermarriage but rather in the fact that it was a feature film that put New Zealanders — Maori and Pakeha — and their country, in the centre of the frame.

The first barrier broken by the film was that of the monopoly on visual representations of New Zealand exercised by the National Film Unit. Mirams and O'Shea succeeded in their attempt to tell a new story about New Zealand that complicated the usual story of harmonious race relations. The second barrier was making a successful feature film. Although it took the makers a long time to recoup their investment, the film initially drew large audiences and reaped substantial rewards for Kerridge-Odeon.¹¹⁰

Remapping the making of *Broken Barrier* suggests the importance of being cognizant of its historical context. It was part of an international wave of film-making dealing with race issues. Although not made in Hollywood, *Broken Barrier* was an off-spring of the Hollywood race cycle, and was informed by UNESCO interest in race relations. The theme of miscegenation that made *Pinky* such a daring success in America was much more ambiguous in New Zealand. In the words of one Maori commentator, Tom 'went native. Anyone can go native.'¹¹¹ Since the time of first settlement, Maori had incorporated newcomers into their communities; there was little that was novel in that theme.

Much more important than the love story were the scenes that revealed aspects of everyday life. One observer of a 'mixed' film audience noted: 'When on approaching the back door of the pleasant farmhouse the family had to shoo the ducks and fowls off the porch the Europeans in the audience laughed. When the white boy drank from the bottle after a Maori boy had had a drink the Maoris laughed; and when the third man, a Maori, received the bottle from the white boy and passed his hand over the neck before drinking, the Maoris in the audience roared.'¹¹² Such moments of everyday intimacy, and how they played out, struck chords of recognition and, as the observer noted, were often viewed differently by Maori and Pakeha.

Breaking the barrier of race meant different things in New Zealand than it did in Hollywood. In the history of New Zealand race relations, there was no 'cinematic color [sic] line' on the screen and rarely in the stalls.¹¹³ Maori and Pakeha viewed the film together; it was in no way socially or politically inflammatory. At the time of the film's release, the directors wrote 'in making a love story [the filmmakers] have been prepared to tackle their subject properly and haven't fought shy, as have some American films, of the fact of intermarriage between the races'.¹¹⁴ They were, I suggest, referring to *Pinky*, a film banned in some Southern towns because of an interracial kiss and, if run, shown to segregated audiences.¹¹⁵ If *Pinky* was a woman's film where intermarriage was rejected because it meant rejecting *Pinky's* identity as a 'Negro', *Broken Barrier* might be seen as a man's film where the dishonourable white hero was inexplicably fortunate enough both to get his Maori 'girl' and to be accepted by a Maori community.

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NOTES

1 My thanks to the organizers of the 2008 Australasian Film and History Conference for inviting me to give the address which prompted this piece. Thanks to all the participants in that conference who responded to the address and, in particular, to Russell Campbell. I am also indebted to the *Journal's* anonymous readers and to my colleague Tony Ballantyne for his invaluable close reading.

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9 *ibid.*, pp.15, 23.

10 Laurence Simmons, 'Casting Aside Old Nets: John O'Shea's First Fight Against Racism', *Illusions*, 33 (2002), p.16; 'Broken Barrier: Mimesis and Mimicry', *Landfall*, 185 (1993), pp.131–6. Russell Campbell discusses *Broken Barrier* in 'In order that they may become civilized: Pakeha ideology in *Rewi's Last Stand*, *Broken Barrier* and *Utu*', *Illusions*, 1 (1986), pp.4–15.

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13 Kathleen McHugh, 'Historicizing Media: Feminism in its Transnational Contexts', Plenary Address, Film and History Association of Australia and New Zealand Conference, University of Otago, December 2008.

14 Mark Juddery, Tributes – 2004, Roger Mirams, 1918–2004 http://www.markjuddery.com/html/tributes/2004_roger_mirams.html (accessed 24 August 2009).

15 Roger Mirams, interview with Elsie Lloyd, 2ZB, Wellington, DCDR76-track 5, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives, Nga Taonga Korero (RNZSA).

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17 *Te Ao Hou*, 1 (1952), p.37.

18 Date courtesy of Simon Sigley. Personal communication.

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30 *New Zealand Truth*, 5 October 1949, p.7.

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32 Mirams, *Speaking Candidly*, p.204.

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