

Taking Off the Black Singlet*



IN THE 1970s THE BLACK SINGLET was bringing smiles to the faces of many New Zealanders. From 1973 Burton Silver's singlet-clad cartoon forester, Bogor, provided light relief in the *Listener* each week.¹ Then John Clarke brought Fred Dagg to the nation's television screens. The laconic Dagg, in singlet, shorts and mismatched gumboots, was a critical and popular success. Clarke was New Zealand Television Personality of the Year in 1974 and 1975.² Wal Footrot, a singlet-wearing farmer, soon joined Dagg and Bogor. From the mid-1970s Murray Ball's *Footrot Flats* cartoon strip was syndicated in newspapers throughout the country and around the world, and in 1986 Wal, Dog, Cheeky Hobson and Aunt Dolly starred in the country's first animated feature-length film.³ These sturdy blokes, in their woollen undershirts, did their befuddled best for man and beast. They stood in stark contrast to earlier iterations of rural masculinity. Rural masculinity had long been admired and feared; the backbone of the country was also potentially disruptive to the family-based social order. In novels and short stories, local histories and family photographs, rural masculinity was rarely the source of laughter.⁴

By the late twentieth century, though, the black singlet had become shorthand for a particular interpretation of New Zealand's past: rural, masculine, hard-working and a bit of a hard-case.⁵ In an increasingly urbanised New Zealand the man alone was the butt of jokes, albeit usually warm-hearted jibes. There were some jarring moments. Jake the Muss, in the dystopian, urban film *Once Were Warriors* (1994), wore his black singlet with menace.⁶ But for the most part the man in the black singlet reinforced a particular rural vision of New Zealand's past that was enjoyed and celebrated. He appeared in Nigel Brown's woodcuts,⁷ and was immortalised in a 7-metre high sculpture in Te Kuiti.⁸ It was fitting that singlet-wearing men graced the cover of the revised edition of Jock Phillips's history of masculinity.⁹

In many ways the history of the black singlet mirrors the history of writing about New Zealand's past: neither really existed in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century both were naturalised into a progressive narrative of emerging national identity. In the 1890s an Australian shearer by the name of Jackie Howe is said to have torn the sleeves off his flannel undershirt so that he was less restricted as he went about his work. He thus invented the proto singlet.¹⁰ Shearers on both sides of the Tasman soon followed Howe's lead. At the same time, former politician William Pember Reeves penned the first general history of New Zealand, *Aotearoa: The Land of the Long White Cloud*.¹¹ The book set in place an understanding of New Zealand that proved to be as durable as a black woollen singlet. Reeves's New Zealand was populated by sturdy pioneers who broke in the land and strove to create a better Britain. Humanitarian, egalitarian, democratic and fundamentally fair, they built a new society with better race relations than other white settler colonies, a country where Jack was as good as his master (and would soon be the boss), where industrial relations were marked

by arbitration rather than class hostility, and where women — helpmeets, wives and mothers — were rewarded with the vote.

The ‘Jacky Howe’, as rural workers sometimes referred to their sleeveless uniform, underwent a few changes in the first half of the twentieth century. By the 1920s local mills were mass-producing dark singlets with high necklines and tight armholes. They tended to be made of coarse, heavy wool, long enough to keep out a cold day’s chill and absorbent enough to soak up a hot day’s sweat. The length remained in post-war versions of the garment, but by the 1950s the neckline was deeply scooped and the armholes were looser.¹² This was the style of singlet that champion shearers Godfrey and Ivan Bowen wore when they met the Royal couple during the Queen’s 1953–1954 tour of New Zealand.

In the late 1950s, as the Bowen brothers broke world shearing records, Keith Sinclair published his *History of New Zealand*.¹³ Like the singlet of the day, it was a bit more relaxed than Reeves’s general history. Whereas Reeves wrote for a British audience, Sinclair, a self-professed cultural nationalist, had his sights firmly set on home.¹⁴ An inward-looking book — some might call it insular and parochial¹⁵ — Sinclair’s *History* and many of his other writings asserted that New Zealand was a tolerant, egalitarian, democratic society, and stressed its growing sense of independence. There was a unique story to be told; New Zealand enjoyed a ‘destiny apart’.¹⁶ Admittedly the country experienced some problems, but nothing that pragmatic social democracy, a welfare state and some number eight fencing wire could not fix. Rather than dwell on the ongoing effects of colonisation, in 1971 Sinclair wrote an article asking why New Zealand had better race relations than South Australia, South Dakota and South Africa. In true Sinclairian fashion, he did not ask if New Zealand’s race relations were better; of that he was sure.¹⁷

A decade after Sinclair’s death Michael King’s *Penguin History of New Zealand* succeeded his *History* as the most popular single-volume ‘go to’ general history of New Zealand. There is more about the environment in King’s history than there was in Sinclair’s, and more of an attempt to be ‘bi-cultural’ — although as Jake Pollock has shown that attempt is problematic¹⁸ — but in many respects the legacy of Reeves and Sinclair lives on in King’s *History*. The final paragraph of King’s book reads: ‘And most New Zealanders, whatever their cultural backgrounds, are good-hearted, practical, commonsensical and tolerant. Those qualities are part of the national cultural capital that has in the past saved the country from the worst excesses of chauvinism and racism seen in other parts of the world. They are as sound a basis as any for optimism about the country’s future.’¹⁹

The black singlet is the archetypal practical, commonsensical garment. It suits the popular general histories that have been written about New Zealand and is appropriate attire for recent histories of sheep stations and shearers.²⁰ But there is more to New Zealand’s past than the rural, the productive and the drably masculine.

Peter Gibbons pointed out many years ago that New Zealand has long been a nation of consumers as well as producers.²¹ Most of those consumers were urban-dwellers. Since the late nineteenth century New Zealand has

been one of the most urbanised societies in the world, a fact that may escape readers of New Zealand history.²² Histories that cover the period from the late nineteenth century through to the outbreak of WWII tend not to focus on the urban. Miles Fairburn put forward an explanation for why this should be so back in 1975, at the very time that Bogor, Dagg and Footrot were amusing the nation. According to Fairburn, the idea of the city was so unappealing to pre-WWII New Zealanders that they 'forced' the 'urban realities' of their lives to 'conform' with the rural culture to which they aspired.²³ If they could not own a family farm, then the suburbs, rather than the inner city, became their refuge.²⁴ Suburban men had to commute to the city for work, but in the evenings and weekends they could tend their suburban sections and create the familial arcadia that remained the New Zealand dream. Suburban men wore a metaphorical, if not an actual, black singlet.

Fairburn's familial arcadia explains how an urban society could live by a rural myth. But it does not account for the pre-WWII popularity of city attractions like restaurants,²⁵ department stores²⁶ and cinemas.²⁷ The trams, trains and bicycles that ferried suburban men to their city workplaces were also used by women, children and young people escaping the suburbs in search of entertainment and enjoyment. And not every man left the city as soon as his workday ended, or eschewed the city during the weekends. Men who lived in 'dry' suburbs understood the attraction of city bars even if they were officially restricted to a six o'clock swill.²⁸ Music, movies and 'mates', in both the hetero-social and homo-social senses of the word, also kept men in town.²⁹

The spoils of a consumerist, materialist, modern lifestyle were easy to find in the towns and cities of pre-WWII New Zealand. But stories about the men and women who enjoyed these urban offerings are hard to find in the Reeves-Sinclair-King school of New Zealand history. Thankfully a growing number of historians are writing about the more entertaining and enjoyable aspects of the country's urban past. They are taking off the black singlet that clothed so much of the history that was written in the twentieth century, and in so doing are questioning some of the fundamental interpretations of New Zealand that are found in the country's general history books.³⁰ This article is part of that revision. It does not attempt to tell a unique national story, or pretend to be universal. Rather, it draws attention to a particular aspect of New Zealand's past that readers may not be aware of in the hope that it may generate debate and encourage research into other forgotten or downplayed areas of the country's social and cultural history.

In February 1903 Dean's Waxworks and Vaudeville Company played at Wellington's Choral Hall. Waxworks of figures such as the late Queen Victoria and Lord Kitchener were always popular, and Dean's vaudeville programme was usually appreciated by the audience, but on this occasion there was a special reason for the sold-out house. As part of the night's entertainment Dean's staged a beauty contest for men. Men from the capital were invited to parade on the stage and try to win the audience's support. This was a popularity contest as well as a beauty competition. The men were competing for the title of 'handsomest man'. The winner was rewarded with a 'substantial prize'; the loser was crowned 'plainest man on exhibition'.³¹

George Dean was not the only impresario to organise male beauty contests in early-twentieth-century New Zealand. Fuller's Empire Vaudeville Company had staged a similar quest a couple of years before,³² and within a few years male beauty competitions were a regular feature at carnivals and fêtes. At the Rainbow Bazaar, held in Wellington's Missions to Seamen Building in 1908, members of the public paid a penny to vote for the handsomest man on display.³³ During the Great War male beauty contests were used to raise funds for wounded soldiers.³⁴ And by the 1920s there were 'ugliest men' contests alongside those for the most handsome, although 'Man About Town', writing for the *Auckland Star*, felt that while such competitions might have a place in Australia 'there could not possibly be any competitors' for them in New Zealand.³⁵

'Man About Town's' trans-Tasman comparison was designed to boost local egos, but his comment is instructive. In 1920s Auckland people were well aware of the latest international trends and fads. Rather than being 20 years behind the times, New Zealand's popular culture was often up with the play. Back in 1889 a Viennese restaurateur had run a contest for the handsomest man, with prizes for 'the most killing moustache', the 'biggest bald head' and the 'largest nose'. The contest received coverage in the New Zealand press.³⁶ Around the same time a 'mashers' contest was held in Dunedin; mashers were the fashionable young men about town who enjoyed the company of young women.³⁷ When Fuller's and Dean's vaudeville companies were running their 'handsomest man' competitions reports were published in New Zealand newspapers about similar manly beauty contests being staged overseas.³⁸ New Zealanders read, and probably laughed, about 'Girly' men in Melbourne who, in 1907, were attending beauty parlours for manicures, face treatments and to have their hair curled,³⁹ but at the same time the local press reminded its readers what the measurements were for 'The Perfect Man' (five foot six inches/1.68m tall, with a 36 inch/91cm chest and a 32 inch/81cm waist).⁴⁰

There were several contemporary definitions of manly perfection. For some, inner life was the mark of the perfect man. Citing Proverbs chapter 20, verse 129, the Reverend Lothian informed his parishioners that unless a man cultivated his soul he could never become 'the perfect man'.⁴¹ Others took a more light-hearted approach. The *Tuapeka Times* broke into verse to describe the perfect man's attributes:

The Perfect Man

His trousers are immaculate,
 No bag disturbs their faultless knee;
 The pattern, too, is up to date,
 And always just the one to please.
 His coat is simply 'out of sight,'
 No wrinkle, bulge, or crease appears;
 The collar sits exactly right,
 No 'jumping tail' its beauty 'queers.'
 His waistcoat is the proper thing,
 His linen and his four-in-hand

The gauntlet to perfection fling,
 His figure's what the girls call 'grand.'
 He has a weak but pretty 'phiz,'
 He ne'er was known to dissipate;
 And this exquisite mortal is
 The fellow in the fashion plate.⁴²

The body that those clothes hung on was also the focus of much discussion in the early twentieth century. A showman by the name of Eugen Sandow earned the moniker 'The Perfect Man' thanks to his body-building routine.⁴³ Sandow's followers in New Zealand aspired to their own bodily perfection and held male beauty and body competitions at gymnasiums at the same time as vaudeville companies were running commercial contests on the stage.

Fred Hornibrook introduced annual physique contests at his Christchurch physical culture institute in 1900. By 1903 there were so many entrants in his competition that new categories had to be introduced. For the young there were prizes for the best developed youth under 18 and another for those under 21. Medals were awarded to the best developed man under nine stone (57kg) and for those under ten stone (63.5kg). Best newcomer was a keenly contested category, but the ultimate prize was winning the school Champion's Gold Medal, awarded to the man deemed to have the best overall development.⁴⁴

Many of the men who joined gyms at this time were no doubt swayed by fears of racial degeneration; they understood that as good citizens they had a responsibility to get their bodies in shape. But there was also an element of fun and titillation in these contests. They were a celebration of beautiful male bodies, and enjoyed as such. Artists joined medical men as the judges, and awarded prizes not just for the man with the most impressive chest expansion, but also for the man with the 'best skin'. Hornibrook even staged some of his contests in art galleries, reinforcing the connection between the ideal Greek types represented in marble and the beautiful physiques of his best pupils.⁴⁵ This connection was taken even further in 1907, when it was announced that New Zealand-raised boxer Robert Fitzsimmons was to be sculptured in marble. It was proposed that the sculpture would then be placed alongside statues of ancient fighters 'for the instruction of future generations in the physical development of the twentieth century'.⁴⁶

Hornibrook wanted to instruct the current generation and did not want to limit that instruction to the men who belonged to his physical culture institute. So in 1910, with several other leading physical culture instructors, he began to plan for New Zealand's first national physique competition. It was a bold proposal. The first national beauty pageant for women was still many years away, but men like Hornibrook knew that similar contests had been held in England, France and the US and felt that it was time New Zealand did the same. In late 1911 their plans came to fruition. The New Zealand Physical Culture Association held its inaugural national contest in Christchurch. Competitors came from Auckland, Masterton, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin, to be judged. Symmetry was essential, but perfection also required 'grace of carriage and ideality of proportions'.⁴⁷

It was expected that Auckland's Norman Kerr would win the national physique contest, since he had recently won first place in the All-Ireland physical development competition. But in the end C. Clifford Jennings, the gold medal winner in Hornibrook's 1903 and 1904 contests, won the day and became, in effect, the first Mr New Zealand. Kerr may have competed overseas, but Jennings had toured the world with Sandow. He learned how to pose from the master, and put his training to good effect in front of his hometown audience.⁴⁸

In 1912 the New Zealand Physical Culture Association staged a national competition in Masterton, a stronghold of the physical culture movement.⁴⁹ The following year the contest was held in Wellington.⁵⁰ But it seems that the outbreak of war put paid to annual competitions, and after the war, with Hornibrook now living in Europe, the association and its annual physique quests fell into abeyance.

But that does not mean that aspiring male beauties pulled on their black singlets and headed for the hills. In the 1920s regional health and physical culture magazines began to be published, and from their first issues they ran photographic 'body beautiful' competitions, encouraging subscribers to send in photographs of their naked, or near naked, bodies. These magazines were full of advice for men who wanted to get 'beach ready' for summer and tips about what the well-dressed man and well-muscled beach-goer should wear.⁵¹ Regulation swimsuits in sensible black or navy were out, although the man who arrived at Auckland's Devonport beach 'immaculate in flannels and silk shirt', changed into a 'flamboyant costume' of green and yellow and then rubbed coconut oil into his body 'with meticulous detail' caused more than a few heads to turn.⁵²

Gaudy swimwear was not embraced by all, but contemporary retailers understood that there was a market for men's swimming costumes in something more racy than black, grey or navy. In 1933 the trade publication the *Draper* contained an article about male consumers. The *Draper* was the magazine of the New Zealand Federation of Drapers, Clothiers and Boot Retailers. It provided practical advice for local retailers as well as foreshadowing the latest trends. In its 1933 piece it identified three types of male shoppers, and explained how salesmen should approach each type. The 'slovenly dresser' just wanted to make a purchase and get out of the shop. Sales assistants were advised to work fast with such men. The 'careful dresser' needed more time; retailers were advised to direct advertisements at the careful dresser's desire to 'dress for success' and make sure the careful dresser was not rushed when it came to decision-making. The third group of male consumers was identified by the *Draper* as the 'sheik type' in homage to Rudolph Valentino's movie roles. He was deeply interested in and highly opinionated about his clothes. Salesmen were advised to give the sheik type 'all the rope he wants'.⁵³

The sheik type was the sort of man who entered Paramount pictures' 1933 'search for beauty'. Paramount's contest was variously referred to as a 'Screen Star Competition' and a 'Beauty Contest'. As well as the New Zealand competition, it was run in several states in America, and in Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland and South Africa. Paramount promised to reward

the perfect men and women from these places with an all expenses paid trip to Hollywood and a five-week contract to appear in their film, *The Search for Beauty*. The man and woman deemed to have given the best performance in *The Search for Beauty* would also receive an additional cash prize.⁵⁴

In New Zealand Paramount's search was held at over 50 movie theatres throughout the country. Single men and women aged 17–30 handed over photographs of themselves and hoped that the judges would pick them for a screen test. Once the entrants had been whittled down to North and South Island semi-finalists their screen tests were, supposedly, sent to Hollywood with the promise that 'seven prominent film directors', including Cecil B. DeMille, would make the final decision. In August it was announced that Colin Tapley and Joyce Nielsen were New Zealand's perfect man and woman. They sailed for Los Angeles a month later.⁵⁵

When Colin and Joyce arrived in Hollywood they were told that Paramount was in receivership and their contract would not be honoured. Fortunately, though, during the trip from New Zealand to Los Angeles, the New Zealanders had befriended the Australian winners of Paramount's contest. Australia's 'perfect man', Brian Norman, was a law student at the University of Sydney, and he put his legal training to good use in Hollywood. Brian ensured that Paramount paid the Australian and New Zealand finalists.⁵⁶

Despite Paramount's problems, *The Search for Beauty* was released in 1934. It featured Olympic swimming champion Larry 'Buster' Crabbe in a parody of the career of one of America's 'perfect men', fitness and health advocate Bernarr Macfadden. Macfadden was infamous for publishing photographs of semi-clad people in his physical culture magazine, and in the film young women were seen admiring the 'beefcake' on show.⁵⁷ The Australasians, though, had to be satisfied with minor roles in *The Search for Beauty*. Of the four, Colin Tapley was the only one to secure a further contract with Paramount.

In early 1939, during a summer holiday in his home town of Dunedin, Colin Tapley told reporters that he had already been in 69 'pictures' in Hollywood, owned a ranch in the US and was planning to buy a sheep station in Otago. After the war he lived in New Zealand for a short while, then returned to England, where he had been stationed during the war. He resumed his film career and became a successful television actor.⁵⁸

Tapley was far from being the only man in interwar New Zealand who thought he was 'perfect'. The local ratio of male to female entrants in the Paramount contest was almost two to one. The judges reported that the men, more so than the women, were 'concerned with establishing their pulchritude before the world and, incidentally getting the gold and the glory which the winner secures'. These masculine beauties were not hiding their talents: although 'it would be violating confidence to reveal the frank way they have postulated their charms', the judges noted 'the utter confidence with which they have indicted their superior points and their amazing magnetic personalities. Well — sometimes you've got to tell 'em — especially in Hollywood!'⁵⁹ The men who entered the search for beauty had grown up in front of American movies. They wanted to look and sound like their screen heroes; some even tried to achieve Clark Gable's dimples.⁶⁰

These stories of men who preened and posed, sought fame on the silver screen, or sauntered down the beach in striking swimwear, are not commonplace in the writing of New Zealand's pre-WWII history. They may seem trivial and of little consequence, but each raises questions about the 'commonsensical' interpretation of the country's past. These were not rural men, nor were their aspirations suburban. They were outward looking and fashion conscious, engaged in international contests and by international trends, and happy to be modern consumers. Their understanding of masculinity did not conform to the stereotypes found in the popular twentieth-century histories of New Zealand, and their wardrobes were not full of black singlets.

Taking off the black singlet may be an apt metaphor for what is needed to broaden and diversify the representation of men in New Zealand history, but what of women? The rewriting of New Zealand's history in the twenty-first century also requires us to revisit the ways we have understood women's lives. Alongside the colonial helpmeet, the moral guardian, the loyal daughter of empire, the wise kuia, the hardworking wife and mother, we need to allow for the possibility that some women in the past kicked up their heels and had some fun. The sugar sack apron, like the black singlet, is part of New Zealand's history, but there was glamour and glitz in women's past too.

Male beauty contests were a novelty at turn-of-the-century vaudeville shows. They were popular — George Dean was fined by the magistrate for over-selling tickets to the Choral Hall competition and thus blocking the staircases⁶¹ — but infrequent. Female beauty contests, though, were soon a staple of urban entertainment. Enticed by the promise of a gold bracelet or watch, perhaps egged on by family or friends, young women took to the stage, eagerly parading in public. Reports suggest that the crowds were not always polite about what was on show. According to Phillida, the *New Zealand Free Lance's* gossip columnist, '[t]here was no beauty' in a contest at the Federal Theatre in December 1900: 'A row of girls from thirty to thirteen stood in the stage facing a most personal and vociferous audience, mostly of boys, who made rude remarks on the appearance of the exhibits, and openly expressed disbelief when they stated their ages. The youngest girl got the prize, which was decided by a show of hands — principally grimy.'

This was, Phillida wrote, her 'first — and last — Beauty Show'.⁶² But a few months later she was back for more, this time at the Choral Hall, where Fuller's Empire Vaudeville Company was offering young women a £5 gold watch if they won the audience's support. This time, according to Phillida, beauty contests were entertaining and 'not to be missed'.⁶³ Priscilla, the Girls' Gossip columnist for the *Evening Post*, was also at the Choral Hall. She felt that the gold watch was 'insufficient recompense for the ordeal, for the audience was painful and free in its remarks, and didn't let politeness stand in the way of truth'. But as she noted, '[t]he crowded hall was certainly a tribute to Mr. Fuller's entertaining'.⁶⁴

Those crowds returned to halls and theatres around the country month after month as numerous beauty contests for women were staged. This was a phenomenon across the Western world, and New Zealand's budding beauties were determined not to be left behind.⁶⁵ In the years before the Great War

many of the competitions were held in the flesh, and were part of commercial entertainments. Young women like Rose Bull, who won a vaudeville beauty contest in Invercargill in 1902, stood on the stage and were judged by the audience; in Bull's case over 2000 crowded into the Zealandia Hall.⁶⁶ Others were part of fund-raising efforts. Wellington celebrated Mother Aubert's Golden Jubilee in 1910 with a carnival. The carnival's beauty show was one of its main attractions. The dozen or so 'fair competitors sat in a marquee as a continuous stream of scrutineers filed in one entrance and out the other'. About 800 people voted for the beauties and declared Miss Lizette Parkes of the Plimmer-Denniston Company the winner. The Prime Minister presented Miss Parkes with her prize, a silver jewel casket.⁶⁷

Not all contests relied on women's physical presence. Competitions run by magazines were based on photographs. Contestants had to fill in an entry form stating not just their name and age but also their height, weight, waist measurement, hair and eye colour, a description of their complexion, and their bust, glove and shoe sizes. Beauty of face and form, not moral virtue and housewifery skills, were the criteria. When the Australian magazine the *Lone Hand* announced such a competition in late 1907 it expected that the women of 'the Dominion of Maoriland', as it liked to call New Zealand, would be stiff opposition for their Australian sisters.⁶⁸ Entrants in the *Lone Hand*'s contest were competing in a world beauty challenge: the *Chicago Tribune* had run a competition in the US and declared that Marguerite Frey, a 19-year-old from Denver, was the most beautiful woman in America. There were 200,000 photographic entries in the *Tribune*'s competition. Now the *Tribune* wanted to judge Frey alongside the most beautiful woman from England, as judged by readers of the *Daily Mirror*, and the most beautiful woman from Australasia, as judged by readers of the *Lone Hand*.⁶⁹ Women entering the Australasian contest were asked to send in three copies of their photograph: 'one for America, one for Great Britain, and one for The Lone Hand'.⁷⁰ Entrants from New Zealand came from around the country: Kathleen McCarthy of Paeroa, Edna Hayes of Gisborne, Mary Yates of 'North Palmerston', Eva Holme of Wellington.⁷¹ Miss Baby Mowat of Blenheim won the New Zealand section, and Alice Buckridge from Victoria was the overall winner of the Australasian contest.⁷²

It was only a matter of time before that most modern form of entertainment, the moving picture, embraced the beauty queen. On Boxing Day 1908 cinemagoers could enjoy *A Newspaper Beauty Competition*, a comic film about the sort of contest that the *Lone Hand* was running.⁷³ And then fiction became fact: movie theatres began running their own beauty contests. Harnessing the wonders of new technology, the early cinema contests projected photographs of the young women onto the silver screen, a number in the corner identifying each contestant. The audience voted for their favourite, and whoever got the most votes won jewellery or cash. In 1909 contests at Christchurch's Theatre Royal and Auckland's Royal Albert Hall ran for weeks and attracted dozens of entrants. Regular updates of the results appeared in the local press and on posters in the cinemas' foyers.⁷⁴ 'Lady Competitor No. 8' won the Christchurch quest, with 900 votes.⁷⁵ Auckland's winner, Miss Bessie Foy, received a gold watch and the honour of having her photograph, along with photos of the

runners-up, 'despatch[ed] to the English Illustrated Papers for reproduction as types of New Zealand Beauty'.⁷⁶

In 1911 the movie theatres went one better. Women were invited to be filmed for what the King's Theatre called 'A Living, Breathing, True-to-life Moving Picture of N.Z.'s Fairest Daughters'. The 'young ladies' were captured by the kinematograph and, as before, the audience got to vote for their favourite. As King's were running their contest they screened a film of a similar beauty competition run by West's cinema chain in Australia.⁷⁷ The public's appetite for beauty queens was, it seems, insatiable.

The hunger continued after the Great War. A contest run in 1922 by Everybody's Theatre in Christchurch attracted over 140 entries, with the winner receiving more than 2000 votes.⁷⁸ Contestants were filmed, and competed for cash prizes, but that did not explain why '[f]eminine circles in Christchurch [were] agog with excitement' about this competition.⁷⁹ The added interest was due to the promise that 'if desired' the winner would be 'recommended to a big Motion Picture Producing Company in America'.⁸⁰ She would not simply appear on a Christchurch movie screen; she could become a movie star.

Auckland women who entered a beauty competition run by Everybody's a few months later were not promised such a recommendation, but the 'galaxy of beauty, from Remuera, Herne Bay, Green Lane, Takapuna, and many other districts' was compared to the screen sirens of the day: entrants were referred to as 'Mary Pickfords, Gloria Swansons, and Flora Finches'.⁸¹ Like the Hollywood stars, Auckland's 'stately blondes' and 'fluffy flappers' were said to be 'a treat for the tired business man'.⁸² There was nothing familial about this arcadia.

Everybody's Auckland quest was a 'Sensational Success'.⁸³ But there were more sensations to come. In 1923 the Venetian Carnival at Auckland's Calliope Dock saw Father Neptune joined by 'his fascinating daughters, the "Mack Sennett" girls', who delighted the public with their bathing dress competition.⁸⁴ The age of the swimsuit parade had dawned. Film was not forgotten in this new development. As *Truth* noted, there were '[f]our ways to break [in]to the movies: Look scrumptious in a bathing costume. Win a world's heavyweight championship. Win a beauty contest. Commit murder and be acquitted. But under no circumstances try to act your way in. That is the hardest and least successful manner of becoming a star'.⁸⁵ New Zealand women could now combine looking 'scrumptious' in their swimsuits and winning beauty contests, and could do so on screen. In the summer of 1925 Auckland's Grand Theatre held a bathing girl parade. 'Auckland's mermaids' were filmed at the beach, showing off their 'particular charms in face and figure', and the films were then screened at the cinema, where audiences were again asked to vote for their favourite beauty. Those who bought the more expensive seats at the Grand were rewarded with more votes: a 1s. ticket entitled the holder to two votes, but a 2s. ticket meant ten votes. Each 'beach nymph' had a minute in front of the camera to convince voters of her charms. She also appeared in person at the Grand, 'garbed in multi-coloured raiment'.⁸⁶

The next obvious development for this most modern, urban and consumerist form of entertainment was to go national. As New Zealanders were well aware,

the first Miss America had been crowned at Atlantic City in 1921.⁸⁷ By the end of the decade young women in New Zealand, Australia, France, England, Austria and Spain were wearing their nation's satin sashes; a Miss Europe contest also began in 1928.⁸⁸

A 'Miss New Zealand' contest was held as part of the Lyall Bay Beach Gala during the Christmas holidays in 1925. Although the contest was billed as a 'National Bathing Beauty Contest' entrants were locals and coverage of the event was limited.⁸⁹ That all changed when the first proper Miss New Zealand contest was held a few months later. Run by newspapers in the four main centres, in conjunction with New Zealand Entertainers Ltd, the competition saw entrants from North Cape to the Bluff competing for the title 'Miss New Zealand 1926'. Thousands filled in the entry form and sent off their five shillings entrance fee, and after many interviews, photographs and parades on stage, Thelma McMillan, a 19-year-old shop assistant from Arthur Barnett's department store in Dunedin, walked away with £250 cash and the offer of a film screen test in Hollywood.⁹⁰

Many years after she hung up her sash, Thelma Scott, as she was then known, told an interviewer that she was 'very strictly brought up'. Her mother would not allow her to take up the chance of a movie screen test that came with the Miss New Zealand crown.⁹¹ She later claimed that in her day 'the bathing suit parade was done in private[,] only in front of the judges. Women used to be a lot more mysterious.'⁹² Thelma's modesty, though, was not as well protected as she remembered. Back in 1926 her vital statistics were printed for all to read (34"-27"-37") and, contrary to her claims about the mysteriousness of women, she paraded in her bathing suit, not just before the judges but also in a vaudeville show in the lead-up to the national finals, in a stage show in the week after the final, and in a film of the finalists that screened around New Zealand after she was crowned.⁹³

Thelma's misrememberings are instructive. Throughout the interwar period thousands of young women entered beauty contests and hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders attended the shows, pored over photographs of entrants, filled in voting forms in magazines and at movie theatres, and felt it was their right to discuss the bodies, faces and personalities of the competitors. During the Miss New Zealand 1926 contest, for example, 656 women competed for the title of Miss Auckland and over 500,000 voting forms were sent to the *Auckland Star's* office to elect the province's representative in the national quest.⁹⁴ Hundreds gathered at railway stations as the train carrying the southern finalists in the Miss New Zealand contest travelled north; well-wishers mobbed the finalists' cars in Auckland and staged vigils outside their hotel; mounted police had to keep the route clear as the finalists made their way from the railway station to their hotel.⁹⁵ The contest was the talk of the town and the photographs of competitors that were reproduced in the newspaper every day were eagerly sought out. The first words uttered by a young girl, on coming-to after an operation, were 'I want to see the beauties in the "Star"'.⁹⁶ Reports suggested that many young women had taken to reading the newspaper, now that there were daily updates on the beauty quest.⁹⁷ A wife complained that her husband 'takes no interest in anything but the beauty contest'. He had

bought 'a silk shirt, collars and tie and ... silk socks' to wear with his best suit to the final.⁹⁸ 'A Suburbanite' wrote to the paper to praise the contest. Her husband was so taken with the contest that he made his own glue to stick the pictures of the 'pretty girls' into special books, and asked his friends from other centres to send pictures of the contestants from their areas.⁹⁹ This was a different suburban dream from the one Fairburn wrote about.

Despite the popularity of the competitions, though, there was unease about the propriety of parading young women's bodies for all to see.¹⁰⁰ Some, like Thelma, clothed the contestants in respectability, denying that they ever posed in swimsuits or wore 'paint, powder or pencil'.¹⁰¹ Others claimed the contests were about health and good citizenship.¹⁰² Beauty contests, like physique contests before them, could serve eugenic agendas. But for every critic and concerned citizen there was a bevy of beauties eager to put their names, faces and bodies forward, in the hope of winning a satin sash and a sparkly crown.

Although they sat comfortably on the beauty queen's throne, relishing the attention they received, enjoying the cash and other prizes awarded to the winners, these beauty queens do not sit comfortably in general understandings of New Zealand's past. They were far more consumerist than the 'productive nation' view of New Zealand allows. These were the women who flocked to the department stores that Helen Laurenson has written so lovingly about. They preferred to go to the movies rather than to a meeting of the Women's Institute. They read film and fashion magazines, were more interested in make-up than making do, and they aspired to personal fame and fortune. Winning a beauty contest, especially a bathing beauty contest, could lead to a movie contract and a star on the dressing room door.

Most women never won a beauty contest, let alone a movie contract. Few men saw their photographs reproduced in muscle magazines. Even if they were less than successful, these men and women, and the people who watched them, belong in our history books. They were not cultural outliers; they embodied the modernity, consumerism and playfulness that permeated much of early-twentieth-century urban life. Moreover, they are also reminders that New Zealand's popular culture was deliberately and self-consciously in step with trends elsewhere. The black singlet view of the past is worth revising. It is not a case that we either have singlets or sparkles. They co-existed in the past and should be able to co-exist in our history books. We should be able to take off the black singlet when the wool is causing a rash, and put it on when its warmth and protection is required. But no one should wear a black singlet all of the time.

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NOTES

* I am grateful, as ever, to Deborah Montgomerie, for her suggestions, improvements and encouragement.

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2 http://mrjohnclarke.com/static/files/assets/26705016/John_Clarke_CV.pdf (accessed 21 June 2012).

3 *Sunday Star Times*, 7 October 2007 at <http://www.stuff.co.nz/sunday-star-times/features/profiles/17425/Footrot-Flats-Murray-Ball> (accessed 25 June 2012).

4 The classic fictional representation was John Mulgan's Johnson in his 1939 novel, *Man Alone*.

5 On the role of the black singlet in New Zealand history see Stephanie Gibson, 'Engaging in Mischief: The Black Singlet in New Zealand Culture', in Bronwyn Labrum, Fiona McKergow and Stephanie Gibson, eds, *Looking Flash: Clothing in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Auckland, 2007, pp.206–21. The essay was reworked as 'The Black Singlet as a Cultural Icon', in Doris de Pont, curator, *Black: The History of Black: Fashion, Society and Culture in New Zealand*, Auckland, 2012, pp.118–35.

6 Helen Martin, 'Black Clothing in New Zealand Cinema: Icon, Archetype & Style', in de Pont, *Black*, p.141.

7 Gregory O'Brien, *Nigel Brown*, Auckland, 1991.

8 *Waikato Times*, 12 December 2009, p.7. The statue was the work of Denis Hall.

9 Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male — A History*, revised edn, Auckland, 1996.

10 <http://jackiehowe.com.au/3.html> (accessed 22 June 2012).

11 William Pember Reeves, *Aotearoa: The Land of the Long White Cloud*, London, 1898.

12 Gibson, 'Engaging in Mischief', p.215.

13 <http://www.nzedge.com/heroes/bowen.html> (accessed 8 July 2009); Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, Harmondsworth, 1959.

14 A year after Sinclair's *History* appeared, Bill Oliver's *Short History* was published. Part of an international series, and written for a wider audience, Oliver's less optimistic work did not attract local readers in the same way as Sinclair's *History*. W.H. Oliver, *The Story of New Zealand*, London, 1960.

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18 Jacob Pollock, 'Cultural Colonization and Textual Biculturalism: James Belich and Michael King's General Histories in New Zealand', NZJH, 41, 2 (2007), pp.180–98.

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20 See, for example, Hazel Riseborough, *Ngamatea: The Land and the People*, Auckland, 2006; Robert Peden, *Making Sheep Country: Mt. Peel Station and the Transformation of the Tussock Lands*, Auckland, 2011; Hazel Riseborough, *Shear Hard Work: A History of New Zealand Shearing*, Auckland, 2010.

21 Peter Gibbons, 'The Far Side of the Search for Identity: Reconsidering New Zealand History', NZJH, 37, 1 (2003), pp.38–49, especially pp.39, 43, 44. See also Caroline Daley, 'Modernity, Consumption and Leisure', in Giselle Byrnes, ed., *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, South Melbourne, 2009, pp.423–45.

22 Campbell James Gibson, 'Demographic History of New Zealand', PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1971, p.65.

23 Miles Fairburn, 'The Rural Myth and the New Urban Frontier', NZJH, 9, 1 (1975), p.10.

24 *ibid.*, p.14.

25 Perrin Rowland, *Dining Out: A History of the Restaurant in New Zealand*, Auckland, 2010.

26 Ian Hunter, *Farmers, Your Store for 100 Years*, Auckland, 2009; Helen B. Laursen, *Going Up, Going Down: The Rise and Fall of the Department Store*, Auckland, 2005; Jim Sullivan, *One Hundred Years of Loyalty: The Story of Arthur Barnett Ltd*, Dunedin, 2003; Julia Millen, *Kirkcaldie & Stains: A Wellington Story*, Wellington, 2000.

27 Wayne Brittenden, *The Celluloid Circus: The Heyday of the New Zealand Picture Theatre*,

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28 Craig Turney, 'The New Zealand Alliance and Auckland, 1905–1920', MA thesis, The University of Auckland, 1996.

29 On music see, in particular, Chris Bourke, *Blue Smoke: The Lost Dawn of New Zealand Popular Music, 1918–1964*, Auckland, 2010; Mahora Peters, *Showband! Mahora and the Maori Volcanics*, Wellington, 2005; Nina Herriman, 'The Air Down Here: Global and Local Interpretations of New Zealand Popular Music, 1955–1977', MA thesis, The University of Auckland, 2004. References to movies can be found above. On 'mates' see Phillips, *A Man's Country* and Chris Brickell, *Mates & Lovers: A History of Gay New Zealand*, Auckland, 2008.

30 In addition to work on restaurants, department stores, movies, music and mates cited above, see also work on romance and sexual subcultures (Charlotte Burgess, 'Looking to the Heart: Young People, Romance and Courtship in Interwar New Zealand', MA thesis, The University of Auckland, 2007; Lily Emerson, 'Flipping the Switch: A History of Sex Shops, Swingers and Sadomasochism in New Zealand', MA thesis, The University of Auckland, 2012), fashion (Labrum, McKergow and Gibson, eds, *Looking Flash*; Lucy Hammonds, Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins and Claire Regnault, *The Dress Circle: New Zealand Fashion Design Since 1940*, Auckland, 2010), going to the beach (Emma Joyce, 'The Pursuit of Sun, Sand and Surf: Beach-going in New Zealand, 1910–1970', MA thesis, The University of Auckland, 2006), and dance (Marianne Schultz, 'From the Haka to *Dancing With the Stars*: New Zealand Men Dancing, 1905–2005', MA thesis, The University of Auckland, 2008).

31 *Evening Post* (EP), 20 February 1903, p.5.

32 EP, 8 August 1901, p.6; 17 August 1901, p.10; *New Zealand Free Lance*, 17 August 1901, p.10.

33 EP, 30 July 1908, p.2.

34 EP, 1 June 1915, p.2.

35 *Daily Telegraph* (Napier), 29 December 1923, p.6; *Auckland Star* (AS), 3 September 1926, p.6.

36 *Te Aroha News*, 11 May 1889, p.4.

37 AS, 9 November 1926, p.19, reporting on a contest held 'some forty odd years ago'.

38 See, for example, EP, 25 July 1903, p.10 and *Hawera and Normanby Star*, 7 August 1903, p.4, for reports on a contest in Vienna.

39 EP, 9 November 1907, p.11.

40 *New Zealand Graphic*, 16 November 1907, p.28.

41 AS, 20 November 1899, p.2.

42 *Tuapeka Times*, 9 April 1892, p.2.

43 *Press*, 7 February 1902, p.6; EP, 7 February 1902, p.2. See also Caroline Daley, *Leisure & Pleasure: Reshaping & Revealing the New Zealand Body 1900–1960*, Auckland, 2003.

44 Daley, *Leisure & Pleasure*, p.49.

45 *ibid.*

46 *New Zealand Graphic*, 14 December 1907, p.36. There is a statue of Fitzsimmons in his hometown of Timaru.

47 *Lyttelton Times*, 28 October 1911, p.10.

48 *Lyttelton Times*, 23 October 1911, p.7; 28 October 1911, p.10.

49 *Wairarapa Daily Times*, 9 October 1912, p.5; 11 October 1912, pp.4, 5; 12 October 1912, p.4.

50 EP, 31 October 1913, p.2; 5 November 1913, p.11.

51 See, for example, *Health and Physical Culture* (HPC), 1 December 1937, pp.38–39, 46; *Man*, November 1937, p.85; *Man*, October 1938, p.145. An Australian magazine, *Man* was widely available in New Zealand.

52 AS, 23 January 1925, p.9.

53 *Draper*, September 1933, p.34, cited in Danielle Sprecher, 'The Right Appearance: Representations of Fashion, Gender, and Modernity in Inter-War New Zealand, 1918–1939', MA thesis, The University of Auckland, 1997, p.34.

54 AS, 1 July 1933, Magazine Section, p.5; *Otago Daily Times* (ODT), 5 July 1933, p.3; AS, 8 July 1933, p.18; ODT, 22 August 1933, p.8; AS, 2 September 1933, Magazine Section, p.5.

55 AS, 8 July 1933, p.18; AS, 5 August 1933, Magazine Section, p.5; ODT, 16 August 1933, p.3; AS, 22 August 1933, p.5; ODT, 6 September 1933, p.3.

56 Biography for Brian Norman, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0635453/bio> (accessed 26 June 2012).

57 *Search for Beauty* (1934), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0025755> (accessed 26 June 2012); *Truth*, 13 October 1937, p.30.

58 Biography for Colin Tapley, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0850029/bio> (accessed 26 June 2012); *Truth*, 4 January 1939, p.1. On her return to New Zealand Joyce Nielsen married Maurice Yock of Auckland and appears never to have acted in films again: *Truth*, 2 August 1939, p.17.

59 AS, 19 August 1933, Magazine Section, p.5.

60 Burgess, p.54.

61 EP, 4 March 1903, p.4.

62 *New Zealand Free Lance*, 15 December 1900, p.8.

63 *New Zealand Free Lance*, 17 August 1901, p.10.

64 EP, 17 August 1901, p.10.

65 Reports of international beauty contests for women appeared in New Zealand newspapers throughout the decade. See, for example, AS, 5 September 1903, Supplement p.2, for a story about a US contest; *New Zealand Free Lance*, 21 December 1907, p.22, for a report on a beauty competition in the British Midlands judged by the visiting New Zealand 'All Golds' rugby league team; EP, 24 October 1908, p.7, for coverage of a beauty show in the English town of Southend; EP, 22 January 1909, p.2, for a story about a 'genuinely "international"' beauty show held at Earl's Court before an audience of 'several thousand'; and EP, 5 October 1909, p.9, for a report on a beauty contest held at Folkestone, England, where the winner was given a piano.

66 *Southland Times*, 17 March 1902, p.3; 18 March 1902, p.2.

67 EP, 7 November 1910, p.2.

68 *Lone Hand* (LH), 2 December 1907, p.xxiv. The contest was announced in local newspapers too. See, for example, *Hawera and Normanby Star*, 6 November 1907, p.4; EP, 9 November 1907, p.13.

69 LH, 1 November 1907, p.12.

70 LH, 2 December 1907, p.144.

71 LH, 1 January 1908, p.257; 1 April 1908, p.611; 1 May 1908, p.49; 1 February 1909, p.414.

72 LH, 1 February 1909, p.412. The *Lone Hand* ran another Australasian beauty competition during the Great War, which was won by a contestant from the 'Dominion of Maoriland'. Miss Enid Sharpin from Gisborne was rewarded with a prize of £50 and the knowledge that many soldiers in Palestine and France had followed the contest with interest and sent in votes. LH, 1 August 1916, p.126; 1 November 1917, p.506; 1 February 1918, p.132.

73 EP, 26 December 1908, p.6.

74 For the Theatre Royal see *Press*, 24 April 1909, pp.1, 9; 1 May 1909, p.1; 3 May 1909, pp.1, 7; 10 May 1909, p.1. For the Royal Albert Hall see *New Zealand Herald* (NZH), 11 May 1909, p.10; 11 May 1909, p.10; 18 May 1909, p.10; 7 June 1909, p.3; 14 June 1909, p.3.

75 *Press*, 10 May 1909, p.1.

76 NZH, 18 May 1909, p.10; 7 June 1909, p.3; 14 June 1909, p.3.

77 EP, 25 March 1911, p.6; 6 April 1911, p.2.

78 *Press*, 11 November 1922, p.16; 27 December 1922, p.2.

79 *Press*, 27 October 1922, p.2.

80 *Press*, 26 October 1922, p.1.

81 AS, 10 November 1922, p.12; 17 November 1922, p.12.

82 AS, 11 November 1922, p.16; 14 November 1922, p.12.

83 AS, 22 November 1922, p.16.

84 AS, 16 March 1923, p.7.

85 *Truth*, 8 December 1923, p.14.

86 AS, 13 February 1925, p.14; 16 February 1925, p.14; 5 March 1925, p.20.

87 AS, 17 September 1921, p.22.

88 In 1926 the first Miss New Zealand, Miss Australia and Miss France contests were held. The inaugural Miss England was crowned in 1928; Miss Austria and Miss Spain were first crowned in 1929. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_beauty_contests (accessed 28 June 2012). See also Candace Savage, *Beauty Queens: A Playful History*, New York, London and Paris, 1998; Elissa Stein, *Here She Comes...Beauty Queen*, San Francisco, 2006; Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and

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89 *Truth*, 7 November 1925, p.5; EP, 26 December 1925, p.6; EP, 28 December 1925, p.8; EP, 30 December 1925, p.7; EP, 8 January 1926, p.2.

90 AS, 30 August 1926, p.10; 1 September 1926, p.9.

91 AS, 16 July 1964, p.17.

92 AS, 18 May 1979, p.2.

93 AS, 20 October 1926, p.11; AS, 11 November 1926, p.9; NZH, 13 December 1926, p.20.

94 AS, 25 October 1926, p.9; 9 November 1926, p.8.

95 AS, 10 November 1926, p.10; 22 November 1926, p.9.

96 AS, 10 September 1926, p.9.

97 AS, 18 September 1926, p.10.

98 AS, 6 November 1926, p.11.

99 AS, 30 November 1926, p.8.

100 *Press*, 27 November 1926, p.16.

101 AS, 10 September 1926, p.9.

102 AS, 23 November 1926, p.9.