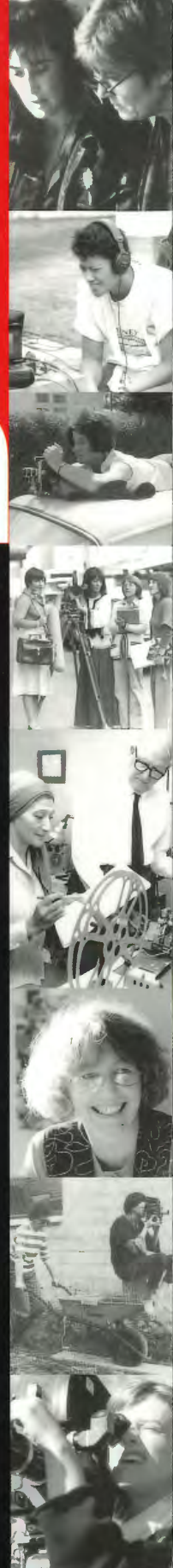


*reframing*

a history of New Zealand film  
**Women**



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## Introduction

One of the first questions that demands to be addressed in opening this study is: why a book on women and film in New Zealand? Do we need a book on this subject and is the category 'woman' a useful one? Some theorists would argue that adopting the category 'woman' as an organising principle is inherently problematical because it marginalises women. It implies that women are a kind of sub-category that exist outside of the established canon and are therefore not as important. Other theorists would question whether gender constitutes 'a valid delineation of subject matter,' and have wondered what an exclusive study of women might leave out.<sup>1</sup> Still more have challenged essentialist notions of women as a unified group, alerting us to the differences between women and suggesting that they can not be reduced to a single shared identity. Such arguments are pertinent but, as the following discussion of the fate of international film-makers like Alice Guy Blaché and New Zealand film-maker Ramai Hayward will show, it is vitally important that the historical documentation of women's film remain an ongoing concern. In the case of New Zealand film, until the first stage of empirical research has been accomplished and the women who were formerly 'hidden from history' recuperated, the theoretical insights will remain circumscribed by the limitations of inadequate documentation.

To date nobody has attempted to fully document the history of women film-makers in New Zealand though Jocelyn Robson and Beverley Zalcock have made a comparison of Australian and New Zealand women's films 1970–1997, based on secondary sources in *Girls Own Stories: Australian and New Zealand Women's Films*, (1997) and selected women's films have been documented in Helen Martin and Sam Edwards, *New Zealand Film 1912–1996* and Jonathan Dennis and Jan Beiringa's *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand* (1992 and 1996). Additionally there have been occasional references to women film-makers in general historical texts such as *The Book of New Zealand Women* (1991), various volumes of *The New Zealand Dictionary of Biography* and *Standing in the Sunshine* (1993) but there has never been an entire volume devoted to the subject. The fact that Australian women's film history was documented in Andree Wright's *Brilliant Careers: Women in Australian Cinema* as long ago as 1986 and here in New Zealand revisionist histories appeared in the visual arts and literature over a decade ago suggests that a history of women and film in New Zealand, one that is based on primary research and one that provides opportunities for women film-makers to speak in their own voice, is long overdue.<sup>2</sup>

The resurrection of women film pioneers worldwide has been slowly gathering momentum over the past three decades yet still there are instances where their achievements continue to be erased from film history. In 1896 Alice Guy Blaché directed *La Fee aux Choux* (a film about a woman who grows children in a cabbage patch). According to feminist film scholars, this film established her as the one of the first people in the world to direct a narrative film.<sup>3</sup>

Over her career Blaché also directed, produced or supervised over three hundred films — including fairy tales, fantasy films, horror films, comedies, and trick films — some of them on a lavish scale. Yet despite this phenomenal activity the *Oxford History of World Cinema* (1996), subtitled 'The definitive history of cinema worldwide', all but ignored Alice Guy Blaché's contribution save for two oblique references within an entry on Gaumont Films. This problem of misrepresentation in historical constructions is not an isolated phenomenon. Researching the history of women and film in New Zealand I have found a similar dynamic operating whereby the work of certain Pakeha male film-makers and their films has been privileged over others, inserted into the canon with such regularity that they eventually assume unquestioned status. In this scenario the contribution of women remains shrouded and forgotten.

To illustrate my point I want to return to 1989 when, fresh from an inspirational paper in feminist studies at Canterbury University, I began work on an MA research paper at Auckland University on the career of Maori film-maker Ramai Hayward. During the course of interviewing Ramai I was riveted by her stories of making educational films in far off places like China, Albania, The Poor Knights Island, as well as the South Island high country, through the 1950s–1970s and yet when I searched through the various publications on New Zealand film-making there was barely a trace of her activity. On the rare occasions when she was mentioned it was in relation to Rudall Hayward, as the wife of the 'pioneer film-maker.' Jim Tully's reporting on the making of *To Love a Maori* in the *Auckland Star* (1970), referred to Ramai like this:

I called at Rudall Hayward's Epsom home to discuss *To Love a Maori* and the problems of making films in a country which offers little incentive or encouragement to the professional film-maker and was met at the door by the other half of Hayward Film Productions, his wife Ramai. Ramai played Ariana, the beautiful Maori girl in 'Rewi's Last Stand.' Now an attractive, slim, middle-aged woman she is her husband's indispensable assistant.<sup>4</sup>

By referring to Ramai as Rudall's 'indispensable assistant' the writer undermines Ramai's position as co-director on the feature film. In the next sentence the writer further confirms his perception of the partnership: 'She guided me through to a small square room where Rudall Hayward sat at a desk editing films.' In this snapshot image Rudall is the 'professional film-maker', who actually makes the films while Ramai, who was probably taken away from her seat at the editing bench with Rudall to answer the door, is positioned as an 'attractive, slim, middle-aged' assistant. The fact that the 'beautiful Maori girl' was currently working with rural Maori youth at Auckland Polytechnic, helping them with the process of adaptation to the city, and it was through these connections that the feature *To Love a Maori* came about, is never highlighted.

If the contemporary recording of the Hayward's film-making obscured Ramai's contribution, the historical surveys after Rudall's death ignored her altogether. For instance, in *Film-making in New Zealand: a brief historical survey* (1984), which constituted one of the first chronologies of film in this country, Clive Sowry described the Hayward contribution in the following way.

The name Rudall Hayward is synonymous with New Zealand film-making in the 1920s and 1930s. During this time he produced six features and a large number of one and two reel comedies, industrials and news films . . . Despite small budgets, few of Hayward's features returned any profit from local distribution. Nevertheless, Hayward persevered, devoting all his energy to producing distinctly New Zealand films . . . Hayward's film-making career spanned more than fifty years. He died in 1974 while promoting his last feature *To Love A Maori* (1972).<sup>5</sup>

In this account the film director toils, in solitary isolation, devoting so much energy to the film-making that he eventually dies in action. Yet as Part One will show, Rudall never laboured alone. During the 1920s and '30s his first wife Hilda provided him with a family home and a darkroom and was involved in the film projects as casting agent, location manager, production manager, wardrobe person, laboratory assistant, editor, stills photographer and on one occasion as an actor. Equally Ramai Hayward provided Rudall with a home and a darkroom and her earlier career, as a photographer running a thriving studio in Devonport, ideally equipped her for her role as co-director. The fact that these women and other major pioneers, such as realist documentary film-maker Margaret Thomson, were ignored in this and subsequent texts raises questions about film historiography in New Zealand.

In the process of researching this book I have surveyed all of the available texts, articles, speeches and documentary film surveys on New Zealand film history and found a persistent masculinist ideology which heroizes male endeavour, constructing film pioneers as robust, resourceful inventors who labour against the odds, splicing films together with 'no.8 fence wire' ingenuity.<sup>6</sup> In many respects these accounts echo the masculinist trend in New Zealand literature 1930–1960 where writers such as A.R.D. Fairburn, Denis Glover, John Mulgan and Frank Sargeson linked national identity to the ordinary Kiwi bloke. In the process the work of women writers was dismissed. A similar dynamic operates in New Zealand film historiography whereby the introduction of a female collaborator into the account would seriously undermine the image of the male film pioneer as lone crusader. One of the most exaggerated versions of this kind of film history was Ian Mune's speech at the opening of Auckland's Production Village in 1994. Reprinted in *Onfilm* his historical overview contained the following account of Rudall Hayward:

You know about *Hamilton's Hectic Husbands*, don't you? That was Rudall Hayward. *Tilly of Tē Aroha*? *Patty of Palmerston*? There was a whole stack of these things. The Community Comedies they're called. Rudall would turn up in tow with his script in his pocket — it was always pretty much the same script — hold auditions, and the whole town would get involved. One of the young girls would be the star. And a couple of local lads — one in from the farm, maybe the other from the Post Office — rivals in love. And they'd shoot the movie and Rudall would whack it together and by the time it hit the screen, he'd

leave Wanganui watching Winifred while he would whoosh off to notch up a Natalie for Napier. Invention! Imagination! Telling the people their own stories ...<sup>7</sup>

In this dramatic account Rudall Hayward is cast as an energetic, inventive film auteur and other male contributors are similarly valorised. According to Mune it was thanks to men like Roger Donaldson who '... arrived in NZ from Oz, 18 years old with the arse hanging out of his pants,' and Geoff Murphy and Andy Grant 'that a feature film industry evolved.' Two more important figures include John O'Shea, whom Ian Mune observed editing a film: 'He was standing in front of a machine that made more noise than a pneumatic drill ... and whack! He'd chop it off ...' and Peter Jackson: 'In fact the entire developmental process of the NZ industry over the last 30 years has been virtually telescoped into the career of one person. Peter Jackson started making movies because he loved them. Passionately. He didn't go off looking for employment, some safe way of paying the bills while he became a proper film-maker. He just started making them — in the weekends, through the night, spending whatever money he could earn.'<sup>8</sup> This account of Peter Jackson could actually be applied to almost any New Zealand film-maker. The nature of film-making, the high cost of the exercise and the scarcity of funding requires all emerging film-makers to work through weekends and nights with whatever budget is available. But clearly this writer's sympathy lies with the male auteur and in fact any mention of women and their concerns, themes and explorations within this narrative would have stood out as rather absurd. To acknowledge that it was more likely to be Hilda Hayward who 'whooshed' on ahead to prepare the locations, cast the locals and set up the scenes and invariably it was Hilda who aided Rudall to 'whack' the thing together would have disrupted the masculinist narrative.

The impact of a collection of masculinist writing on film history has been to establish a canon that silences or obscures the contribution of women. In this canon, Rudall Hayward is our film pioneer, John O'Shea, founder of Pacific Films is our 'father of film.' 1977 is selected as the pivotal year and Roger Donaldson's *Sleeping Dogs* (1977) the film that launched a feature film industry in New Zealand. The male features produced after 1977 — characterised variously as 'cowboy', 'man alone' or 'boys own' films — have entered into the public imagination as classic examples of New Zealand film. In writing *Reframing Women* it is not my intention to dispute Rudall Hayward's contribution to film. Neither do I dispute the achievements of long-time film-maker John O'Shea, who determinedly produced three features through a fallow period of New Zealand film-making, 1940–1970, and certainly there is an engaging energy about the 'boys own' cinema of the late 1970s and early '80s. What I do question, however, is the way they have become privileged points of reference, recycled ad infinitum, to the exclusion of other voices and approaches to film-making. This book is an attempt to reframe the questions — to insert the input of Hilda Hayward and Ramai Hayward, of our first woman director Margaret Thomson, of the feminist documentaries of the 1970s and the later dramas, shorts, experimental and feature films by women into the records — so that in the future New Zealand film history can reach towards a more inclusive conception of our national cinema.

One of the problems with the earlier texts was their adoption of an auteurist approach to film writing, whereby the director's creative input is the sole focus of attention. In searching for an appropriate method for this book it was clear that such an approach would not adequately account for the early stages of our film history, where much of women's contribution occurred behind the scenes in key supportive roles to the director. Instead I decided to return to the 'creative team' approach employed in my MA thesis on Gaylene Preston. Gaylene Preston suggested the term 'creative team' to me at the Auckland premiere of *Ruby and Rata* (1990). At that event the director Gaylene Preston, producer Robin Laing and actors Yvonne Lawley, Vanessa Rare and Lee Mete-Kingi assembled on stage to present their film and Gaylene said, 'Films are not made by individuals but by creative teams.' Her acknowledgement of the creative input of the film crew thus inspired my interview programme for both my MA and PhD theses, and for this book. It allowed me to flesh out the history of the pioneer collaborators and directors, to gather a more rounded account of film-making in the early days and satisfied a feminist desire to validate the experiences of all women, not just extraordinary women.<sup>9</sup>

*Reframing Women* includes excerpts from interviews with a representative 61 women film-makers, all of whom are featured in the Appendix. Obviously these were not the only practitioners, but as far as was possible, within an interviewing time frame of two years, I have attempted to gather together a representative selection of women. In selecting the 61 film-makers there were certain criteria the women had to fulfil. Obviously their primary allegiance had to be to film. This is not a history of women and television although there are some overlaps as many of the films discussed in this book have, at some time, screened on television and some may have received funding from NZOnAir. Because the primary focus of the interview was on gathering historical information it was inevitable that some areas of the film-making team were represented more fully than others. For example, a woman script-writer could provide more relevant information than the woman who worked as a gaffer (lighting electrician) on the same project. Another concern was to represent the work of emerging film-makers from the Maori, Pacific Island, Greek, Indian, Italian, Polish, Jewish, Yugoslav and other communities. Sometimes those women may have contributed to only one film, however the historical importance of that work merited their inclusion.

In searching for models upon which to base this history I have looked to the field of feminist history for answers. The upsurge of second wave feminism in the 1960s and '70s in America and Britain had a powerful impact on the development of women's history in general. Aware suddenly of the androcentric bias in the historical texts and how as a result women had been marginalised or worse made invisible, writers, academics and theorists from across the disciplines began attempting to rectify the problem. Initially the emphasis was on recovering the mass of information that Virginia Woolf refers to in the opening quotation and filling in the enormous gaps in knowledge. But before long historians like Gerder Lerner perceived a problem with writing 'compensatory and contribution history' that merely filled in the gaps of male history. In *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* (1979) Gerder Lerner problematised instead how up until now women's history had been



'refracted through the lens of men's observation' and because the critical periods in traditional history had been melded to male-dominated political and military events, this had contributed to women's absence in the texts. In her opinion it was time for a paradigm shift whereby new questions such as 'What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define?' could be addressed. This question has underpinned my research process encouraging me to write confidently from a feminist perspective using a methodology that values the input of women participants. It also encouraged me to combine the lived experience of women with film analysis. My approach is a response to challenges from New Zealand historians Shelagh Cox and Charlotte Macdonald who argued that conventional histories, in focusing on the public life of the individual and ignoring the personal and domestic, did not adequately reflect the experiences of women. They said, 'The accepted (if unconscious) rules for writing male-dominated biography may be unsuitable for portraying women's lives' and that, with any new attempts to write women's biography, 'questioning the split between the public and private spheres should help to correct a one-sided way of seeing.' In responding to these challenges, *Reframing Women* includes, for example, diary entries from Hilda Hayward describing how she juggles her roles: pruning carnations, making jelly and re-editing *Tē Kooti's Trail*, and interview excerpts from people like camera operator Mairi Gunn — who narrates how she breast-fed her daughter in between film takes — in an attempt to show how the personal and domestic lives of the film-makers overlap and shape film history.

The title of this book *Reframing Women: A History of New Zealand Film* emerges partly as a logical response to the marginalisation that occurs when books are categorised as women's books and partly as a result of the post-structuralist debate that argues that objectivity in history, or definitive histories are unachievable and even undesirable. Instead we might aim for what Keith Jenkins terms a 'series of histories'. As my title suggests this is not *the* definitive history of New Zealand film, it is one of many possible histories. More specifically, as the 'women' in the title attests, it is a history that is 'seen through the eyes of women' and 'ordered by values they define'.

The inclusion of indigenous women and women who bring a multicultural perspective to bear on their work in *Reframing Women* was not without problems. One question that haunted me, throughout the project, was my position as a Pakeha woman attempting to represent the experiences of 'other' women. This dilemma is explored at length in Part Five. While there were no easy solutions, I adopted a feminist participatory model of research whereby the interview transcripts and the manuscript were presented to the film-makers for editing and comment prior to publication. This at least ensured that the film-makers had a voice in the process.

Researching this book has taken me on a strenuous and exhilarating journey. There have been a number of highlights along the way. One involved tracking down Irish film-maker Deirdre McCartin in Ireland. Deirdre was the remarkable, determined director, a key driving force behind the production of seven major feminist documentaries between 1975–1976. She left New Zealand in 1978 taking the documentaries on a screening tour to the USA and Europe. She never returned and her key collaborators on the films had lost contact. In 1993 I was temporarily living in London and beginning work on a PhD with the Centre for Film, Television and Media Studies at the

University of Auckland. I decided to go to Ireland and try and find Deirdre. Before I left I contacted the BBC, who put me onto Irish Television, who directed me to the University of Cork, who supplied me with Deirdre's address on the Beara Peninsula in Southern Ireland. I sent off a letter to Deirdre explaining my impending visit and requesting an interview. The phone rang and down the line came a beautiful, lilting Irish accent, warmly inviting me to Allihies. Deirdre's directions were: 'You'll come to a bend in the road and you'll see a little line of Toy-town houses far in the distance against the cliff. The view, it'll blow your mind.' The entire visit blew my mind. For two days I sat in her tumble-down farmhouse on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean looking out over grassy mounds touched with mist to a turbulent seascape while a voluble Deirdre talked into the microphone. Magically the films, which up until now had been titles on a page, sprang to life as Deirdre related the incredible tales contained in Part Two of this book.

My encounter with 89-year-old London documentary film-maker Margaret Thomson was especially rich. Listening to her tales of an exceptional life, I was struck by the similarities and differences between her life and that of my 88-year-old grandmother. Marriage and the birth of three daughters set my grandmother on a different path; she never developed her career in the printing trade at the local rural newspaper. Perhaps too limited educational opportunities, and the loss of a mother and a sister when she was only two years old, altered her life course and made her opt for the security of marriage and motherhood rather than exploring her career potential. Within her domestic domain, however, she was an inspiring maternal figure.

Margaret Thomson had also experienced family tragedies. Her mother died when Margaret was five and her father died when she was only eighteen. Without her father's insistence on the value of education, which led to her gaining an MSc in Zoology in 1934, Margaret may not have rallied from early family tragedies and achieved an outstanding career. The parallel lives of both of these women have inspired me, but what Margaret's example confirms is the immense value of education in enabling women to achieve their full creative potential.

Margaret Thomson, however, deeply regretted the fact that her career excluded childbearing. It seems that for women of this generation it was virtually impossible to have it all. Attaining Virginia Woolf's set of ideal conditions — that for a woman to be able to fulfil her artistic potential she must have an education, patronage, freedom from domestic chores and a 'room of one's own' — is something that has only been possible in more recent decades. As a younger woman who has benefited from the upsurge of the women's movement in the 1970s, my encounter with women like Margaret Thomson impresses upon me just how fortunate I am to be writing and nurturing children at this moment in history. That is not to say that the road is easy. Juggling the two brings different sets of dilemmas but what is crucial is that I have a choice. As the stories in *Reframing Women* show there has been a revolution in women's lives since pioneers like Margaret Thomson first broke away from the confines of a traditional life and dared to make films. This book is a testament to the determination of the pioneers and to the power of second stage feminism to release women from constricting stereotypes to contact the creative force within. As the explosion of film-making by women in the 1990s suggests, this is a good time for women to be living and creating.