

# The New Zealand Woman's Weekly, 1933–50: an indexing challenge

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*An index of the New Zealand Woman's Weekly provided the author with an opportunity to start her second career by contributing to the work of researchers into New Zealand social history.*

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As a keen genealogist and student of New Zealand (NZ) history, my overwhelming desire when I became redundant from a 30-year career dealing with databases was to make a splash in a new career as an indexer. Having had the experience of opening up the original documents of our ancestors' lives, I wanted the feeling of taking my laptop into a library and opening up a resource for NZ family and social historians. This meshed with the fact that I knew that there was a cabinet of microfilms in the Auckland Public Library from the complete history of the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* (NZWW), a magazine which started life in the throes of the depression, in late 1932. I grew up with this magazine from the 1950s and indeed had appeared in a photo back when I was a blues musician in the early 1970s, as had other people I had known, because the NZWW always included articles about locals and their contributions, even a children's page. When I investigated further, I found the issues prior to 1951 had contained several social columns from around the regions, altogether more local content and photographs than I had imagined, and many items that I thought might well be lost to the generations up to 75 years later. I chose to focus on this period and those identifiable New Zealanders who had been mentioned in one way or another in the magazine, for even in the early stages NZWW published syndicated material from overseas about film stars and royalty and I felt there was less interest in this kind of material from our historical perspective.

So I was hooked into my project, which involved travelling the 100 km round trip into Auckland every day, where I got to house my laptop table in the Auckland Research Centre in the central public library ([Aucklandcitylibraries.com](http://Aucklandcitylibraries.com)). I chose Inmagic's DB/Textworks software, which Auckland Library used, because I could see its great advantage over database products I'd previously worked with, of flexibly sized fields which accepted as many names as needed per record of an article or photo. Also its database (textbase) is both browsable and searchable, using term and word indexed if one sets it up this way. I rationalized what fields were needed to Issue Date, Page, Record Type (Article, Photo, Poem and so on), Creator, Description (usually the title or subtitle), Names recorded, and a Comment field wherein I could enlarge on factors that could make a name identifiable if advisable. It is more than a name index, but those were of central focus to me. Where the title or subtitle of say an article were not clear, I attempted to summarize the material but did not use a controlled vocabulary (Later I found out that was more or less the opposite of the approach taken by Australian social

scientists in indexing a one year in five sample of their *Woman's Weekly*, 1946–71 (see [socsci.flinders.ac.au/wmst/WWindex/](http://socsci.flinders.ac.au/wmst/WWindex/)). Local people as individuals were naturally of little interest to them, except as occasional creators of records.)

I found half the trick in doing a project like this was to keep myself going by measuring daily progress – taking notes for future reference such as missing editions, editing the day's work every evening and taking back any suspect entries to check next day, and estimating the work still to do. I found I was able to keep pretty much to my estimate of data collection time. Then of course there was the content, which periodically was especially enjoyable – such as finding Janet Frame's mother a prizewinner in the Sanitarium recipe contest, seeing the young Anne Perry as Juliet Hulme being reunited with her parents at Christchurch airport in a 1948 photo, and finding a marriage in the Gaeth family ten minutes after I told my neighbour at the microfilm readers I hadn't found anyone of that name. I took notes about nomenclature, odd names, colour names and anything that brought out my collector instincts. At the end it was fun to query forenames, and find as the most typed name for women Joan, with Sarah near the bottom in popularity. There was one Tamla (a favourite name of mine which however predated Tamla-Motown). There were some spectacular names like Corla Cuff, Dalice Dumper, Clodagh Kitcat, Wyvern Bigg Wither, Wilken Bowmast, Vernice Paston-Aston, Forest Grubb, Mrs Pippin Crust, Bibby Tannin and Eana Jeans, which I revelled in. I also noted that the current trend of using male first names or surnames as first names for female children was already well practised here in New Zealand, with instances of Sydney, Graeme, Colin, Neville, Cecil, Mervyn, Stewart, Errol, Rayner and Ramsay all mentioned as female names during the period 1932–50.

During the project I was daily aware that there were many duplications of individuals in the database of names, since in those times married women were routinely called by their husband's surname and initials, or his first name. In addition there were some women, widows, Americans or artistes, who also used their own Christian names. I knew that at the end of the data collection, if I was going to be rigorous about the number of people mentioned, I would have to print out the entire database of names to do checks, because it was impracticable to edit from a macro point of view a window of only ten surnames on the screen! But I had not quite realised that 103,886 names would take 300 odd pages of printout, with six columns at 8pt per page.

Of course I still have this pile, and editing it posed

particular challenges, apart from correcting what mixups I could, about for example Niccol, Niccoll, Nicholl, Nicolle, Nicol, Nicoll and all its plurals. Titles were a particular nuisance, so I got in the habit of using websites such as kinderlibrary.ac.nz for Anglican clergy, nzma.org.nz for medical doctors, nzetc.org.nz (the NZ Electronic Text Centre) for Second World War ranks and the Dictionary of National Biography (dbnz.govt.nz) to find at least the initials of a titled person. But eliminating all duplicates on my own was impossible, and I had to acknowledge that, and hope that feedback might eliminate more. Even so, I cut the database down by nearly 10,000 names (there being still the same number of 50,600 records of course). There are however many names with multiple entries, so that the total number of names in records is over 230,000. It got so that after the thousandth time I found myself almost unable to type 'Barbara'!

So those two to three months of editing were unexpected slog but of big help to my morale was the licensing of the database to The Knowledge Basket, an online repository of digital indexes. This turned out to be the portal of choice for the EPIC project, a digital publishing initiative sponsored by a large consortium of New Zealand libraries, enabling them to offer substantial royalties to the copyright holders of their indexes. The second quarter January to March 2008 shows a tremendous increase in the uptake of information with the statement from SuperIndex showing 844 'view', which I'm told signify successful searches. The third quarter has gone back to first quarter levels, but I hope signifies a base line of continuing use by subscribers.

I wanted to persist with my original idea though, to also put out a CD, with the runtime version of DB/Textworks on it, and my index textbase. I had to write a readme file which was not difficult. But then I had to acquaint myself with how to program the opening menu, query screens and so on, and that was quite demanding, as I was depending heavily on the manual, and also relying on my daughter for tricky things with logos and the like. Said daughter's skills with Photoshop were also highly valuable in getting the CD cover designs completed, and it was a real thrill to get permission to end up with exactly the look I wanted on the front – a 'colourized detail' of a photo from the Alexander Turnbull Library's online collection of Hedda Dyson, the early 'editress', who exerted such a strong influence during her 15 years running the magazine.

Testing the CD was also hard; so many of my friends used a Mac and there was no DB/Textworks edition available for them. The *NZ Woman's Weekly* office itself also used Macs, though they were happy to run a full-page article about the project. Other local genealogists did not have the right set-ups and every time I used a family PC I had to deinstall after testing. Eventually I got my local computing company to write a autorun installation for the textbase software since so many folk seemed unused to seeing the file extensions and could not locate the right setup file. Copying my textbase to the same folder as the software is still a manual process for the installer.

Frustrations over, I was in the business of making sales, and slowly they started to arrive, firstly from libraries who held the microfilms and wanted to load a PC for independent researchers. That was very gratifying as library staff themselves had online access. Some branches of the NZ Society of

Genealogists acquired a CD. In early 2008 I attended their annual conference, where I made further sales. It was great to at last meet one of those child contributors, who was thrilled to be able to locate her poems and penfriend descriptions. When I found a further 18 records of her letters being answered by The Sunshine Lady, she was keen to buy the CD. I did free lookups and was able to find relatives often enough to be satisfying. Of course, 90,000 people 75–57 years ago have many more descendants now! A common misperception is that these folk must be 'society people'. You could get mentioned in the *Woman's Weekly* for getting a massage diploma, or playing hockey, or being a pigeon fancier, or having a baby born while your husband was away at war.

Another worthwhile aspect of the sales trip was to become aware I could possibly continue the index by interloaning microfilms and acquiring a microfilm reader to be housed in my local library, or even in my home instead of travelling long distances for each indexing session.. Each library here seems to be able to make its own decisions about whether it is willing to take part in this plan, and the cost of a reconditioned reader is quite high. But I believe it will be a long time before the historical magazine is digitized, and even if it were I know my index will be far superior to the results of any search engine. There were simply too many errors, which I have realized were the result of so many different contributors being part of the process: from the spies of the social columnists, the handwritten reports from club secretaries handed over the counter, to the typist, the editor, the compositors, photographers and so on. One of my favourite examples is a photograph of a future All Black captain as a cute child labelled Wilson Winray (instead of Whineray).

So I am proud that I did what I set out to do and may yet continue the work, although so far I haven't had the personal contact with researchers that I would have hoped for, and I am still waiting for a review by the *NZSG* magazine. Other rewards are unexpected. One was being instrumental in getting a meaning specific to journalism for the word 'rat', into the NZ Dictionary Centre database, since they have now located a citation for its meaning of a subsidiary job under another non de plume. This came out of being able to interview one of the social columnists of the era, and the mother of an old friend. These contacts and sharing the magazine's interesting and sometimes very amusing contents are the real highlights.

I was also delighted to be able to supply a biographer of playwright Bruce Mason with references to his juvenilia as a child contributor to the magazine, which include a rather delightful story. In a different direction, I was able to contribute material to a book on earlier popular music in New Zealand.

I also set up a website, [JDKindexes.co.nz](http://JDKindexes.co.nz), to promote my work and receive orders, also for book indexing. As a member of ANZSI, I attended training courses in book and periodical indexing part way through my project, and felt validated on the pathway I was on.

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