

ENDNOTES

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"A Lucid lecturess": The Voices of New Zealand's Silent Cinema

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This article attempts to record some of the faint echoes left from the days of silent cinema in New Zealand. Sound has been an integral part of cinematic experience in New Zealand since the very first exhibitions during 1895 but the acoustic dimension of film has been little explored by local historians and media scholars. Cinema audiences listened as much as they watched and these sounds were generated by many sources from gramophones to orchestras. This article concentrates on just one aspect of this richly polyphonic cinematic soundscape: the human voice. Through a discussion of the ways in which lecturers, actors, and audiences used their voices as films were played, this article recovers important aspects of how films were experienced in New Zealand before the arrival of synchronised sound and pictures during the late 1920s.

It is a cliché to write that it is a cliché that silent film was never silent. But both clichés are true. Film was never a silent medium although its silences might be just as important as its sounds at various times and places.¹ There is a large and increasing volume of scholarly work on the wide range of sonic practices that were typically part of cinema-going before the advent of synchronised sound.² But the history of New Zealand cinema is something of a mime show in that very little attention has been paid to the sounds of cinema in general let alone those of the silent era. As an example, the latest general survey of New Zealand cinema makes only passing references to audio and these are mainly about the arrival of synchronised sound (the Talkies) during the late 1920s.³ This is part of a wider pattern of deafness on the part of cinema studies in general with regard to sound.⁴ But the rise of Sound Studies over the last twenty years has seen scholars across a variety of disciplines turn their attentions to the important roles of audio in history, cultures, and media.⁵ It is no longer possible to describe cinema or television as 'visual media' and simply ignore the important and vital roles that sounds play in their construction and reception. The screens we are surrounded with are as much audio devices as visual and scholars must take this into account if they are to grasp old and new media fully.

During the silent era local film viewers were exposed to a rich variety of sounds as they watched the flickering images projected in theatres, churches, town halls, cinemas and wherever else a projector might be set up. Film exhibitors used a wide range of techniques and technologies to generate sounds that filled the acoustic spaces around the films. These included orchestras, lecturers, pianos, actors, audience members, kazoos, wind machines and anything else that could make sound.⁶ It was one experience to watch a film such as *Quo Vadis* (1913) in a plush theatre with an orchestra and choir performing the especially composed score that went with it.⁷ It was quite another to see the same film in a school hall with a pianist improvising music to suit the action on the screen.

The range and variety of these experiences contradicts the idea of cultural modernity as a series of mass produced and standardised experiences or a 'culture industry'.⁸ The silent films enjoyed by New Zealanders were mass produced copies of images but the sounds heard with these films were anything but. Considering silent cinema only as moving pictures ignores the important roles sounds played in local experiences of this emblematic technology of modernity. Far from being the production and consumption of mass-produced and identical

experiences, adding sound to the mix makes local experiences of modernity varied, lumpy, and uneven. This article adds to this lumpiness through a discussion of the many ways in which human voices were important parts of cinema for New Zealanders during the so-called silent era.

The human voice played varied and surprising roles in silent films — from bare description to poetic recitation — from the first appearance of moving pictures in New Zealand. The first film exhibitors in New Zealand used their voices to describe both the equipment and the action on the screen. The vocal accounts given by exhibitors, along with the written accounts, explained the machines and helped to familiarise them. The films were not seen as self-explanatory. The lecturer might expound on the technology being used and also explain what the moving pictures depicted. During his 1896 exhibitions, J.F. MacMahon 'announced the subjects' of the films while a Mr J. Margery operated the equipment.⁹ Newspaper accounts of the technology seem to have been common in the very early years of film exhibitions and served to familiarise the curious with the details of the equipment. Such accounts were often part of the publicity associated with the exhibitions.¹⁰ The explanations of the exhibitors seem to have soon moved from descriptions of the technology to descriptions of the projected scenes.

Women also worked with the new technology of moving pictures, which had not been the case with the earliest phonograph exhibitions. The moving pictures were shown in theatrical contexts where women were established as performers so the moving pictures became another element of stage work. The men and women who described the moving pictures were versatile entertainers. The Christchurch Kinematograph Syndicate toured New Zealand through 1899–1900. Typical of the itinerant film shows of the time, the Syndicate featured several singers, comedians, lantern slides and musicians as well as a variety of kinematograph films including scenes of the South African War. This was a varied night of entertainment of which the films were just one part and during which the performers took on various roles. Harry Baxter, a well-known and popular singer, 'announced' and explained the films.¹¹ As some films were played, Baxter combined both roles of announcer and singer. One reviewer commented on the scene of a troopship leaving for war, 'the effect of which is enhanced by Mr Baxter's singing of an appropriate chorus while the picture moves across the screen'.¹² The sounds that were heard with the Syndicate's films were not continuous and were made by the voice, either as

commentary or as song delivered by a versatile entertainer.

Women also participated with great success as the principal attractions of such tours. In 1900 the Happy St. Georges Company showed kinematograph films including '4000 ft. of animated pictures of the *Passion Play*, with a young lady lecturess', and also offered the traditional repertoire of singer, lantern slides, dancers and variety turns.¹³ This 'young lady lecturess' was Nena Manning and she was an able singer. Her repertoire included *Oro Pro Nobis*, *The Lost Chord* and the 'pathetic song' *Little Hero*, all of which were illustrated with slides and were well received.¹⁴ As versatile a performer as Harry Baxter, she also described the film of the Oberammergau Passion Play that was the company's drawcard. Her descriptions seem to have been as appreciated as her singing. One reviewer noted that her 'distinct delivery and grasp of elocution materially added to the pleasure and interest in the entertainment'.¹⁵ Another described Manning as 'a lucid lecturess'.¹⁶

The announcing roles of Baxter and Manning raise some interesting questions about what they said, how much they said and what their words meant to the audience. The sequences of the war films and the *Passion Play* were published in newspapers and the broad outlines of what the films showed may well have been known to the audience in advance, particularly the events of the *Passion Play*.¹⁷ Did the speakers say only a few brief phrases that gave such details as names, locations or short descriptions? Manning was described as prefacing each view with 'explanatory remarks' which implies that she did not talk all through the pictures but rather set the scene for the viewers so that they could follow the action without distraction.¹⁸ The South African War films often provoked noisy audience responses. Faced with such reactions, speakers such as Baxter may well have struggled to be heard and perhaps made only brief remarks. What was said or left unsaid may have varied from audience to audience and indicates how varied the experiences of early film might be.

The rise of fictional narrative films during the early 1900s called for more complex and, at times, continuous commentaries from film announcers to match the more complex plot structures. These longer films, both comic and serious, went beyond the 'emphasis on display rather than storytelling' that characterised the early 'cinema of attractions'.¹⁹ The rise in popularity of such so-called 'picture dramas' in New Zealand, as elsewhere, was noted by one writer in connection with the activities of the actor Alfred Boothman.²⁰ Boothman was an Australian actor who was popular in New Zealand in the early 1910s. One of his main activities was as a film announcer but he seems

to have gone far beyond the short scene setting that Manning and Baxter had done. The Australian-made film *For the Term of His Natural Life*, a dramatisation of the popular book by Marcus Clarke, was very popular in New Zealand during 1910. At about one hour in duration and with many scene changes and plot elements, the picture was praised by reviewers for its stirring cinematography and ambitious scale.²¹ Boothman's role in this production was to narrate the events that unfolded on screen.²² As one reviewer wrote, Boothman 'describ[ed] the main features of the drama'.²³ Boothman carried on narrating films until 1914. He was described as 'speaking the dialogue' for the 'stirring' film *The Kelly Gang* in 1910. A reviewer commended Boothman's 'clear, expressive voice' and noted that his 'splendid oratorical efforts' were admired by the audience before concluding that 'to have the tragic story of the Kellys explained as the pictures were thrown on the screen was to make one feel that the stirring events being portrayed were being enacted in the flesh at the moment'.²⁴ Clearly, for this reviewer at least, Boothman's spoken commentary added to the images on the screen. But just what was added is unclear.

The words used in conjunction with Boothman's performance – 'describing', 'explaining', 'telling' – conceal as much as they reveal. Did he describe scenes and actions or did he say things that might have been said by the characters? Did he do both? What did the 'explaining' of the pictures consist of and how did his 'oratorical effects' contribute to the realism felt by the *Argus* reviewer? It seems probable that Boothman worked from scripts but without these scripts it is impossible to recover just what he, or other such announcers and actors, may have said. We do not know whether they improvised to suit local conditions or if different speakers used the same scripts. The range of choices indicates the variety of possible experiences with early cinema. The moving images looked the same wherever they were screened but there was nothing standardised about the sounds that went with them.

One later performer in New Zealand who did leave a script for the historian to consult was Barrie Marschel. His 15 stanza poem about Gallipoli, *The Kid From Timaru*, was popular in New Zealand during the First World War and was filmed in 1917. This one-reel feature showed the events of the poem and Marschel toured the country reciting the verse in time with the action on screen. Marschel had some experience as a film lecturer, having provided 'an explanatory lecture' to a 1914 film biography (an early 'biopic') of Queen Victoria.²⁵ *The Kid From Timaru* film was very popular in New Zealand and was described as a 'poem picturised'.²⁶ The poem had been popularised in theatres as a recitation

piece.²⁷ Marschel's touring version was in some ways an extension of the theatrical 'one-hander' shows during which a solo actor presents a piece.²⁸ In this case, however, Marschel presented an entertainment using the popular modern technology of cinema to create a suitable backdrop for his recitation.



Figure 1.1: The poster for *The Kid From Timaru* promised stirring images involving '5,000 New Zealand soldiers' and a recreation of the landing at Gallipoli. But the words spoken by the man who wrote the poem were also billed as a major drawcard for filmgoers.

Eph-A-
CINEMA-1918-01.
Alexander Turnbull
Library, Wellington,
New Zealand. [http://
natlib.govt.nz/
records/32200240](http://natlib.govt.nz/records/32200240)

Marschel claimed to have written the poem after reading a soldier's letter that described the exploits of a young man from Timaru. Some have identified the 'Kid' as being based on James Hagerty who was a famous boxer originally from Timaru and who died at Gallipoli on 27 August 1915 but this is now disputed.²⁹ The poem uses a ballad structure and simple rhymes that make it easy to remember and understand when heard rather than read.

And when the fight was over and each had done his part,
And felt a man and soldier, with aching eye and heart,
I searched among the wounded for the fellow that I knew,
I turned one over on the sand — 'twas Kidd from Timaru.

He'd carried in his Captain, almost dying through the wrack,
Of smoke and fire of battle; but just as he'd got back,
A Turkish sniper "pink'd" him but the bullet went clean through,
And when he's well they'll hear again from Kidd of Timaru.³⁰

The impact of the war and the sentimental and heroic nature of Marschel's story made the show very popular.³¹ As with the case of the popular Boothman's 'descriptions' and 'explanations', Marschel's feature length vocal performance was an important attraction along with the pictures. These types of silent cinema required close listening from their audience members.

Some spoken film shows were intended to do more than entertain and inform. Moving images became an important part of the lecturing involved in popular education and self-improvement, as films became popular adjuncts to the already familiar lantern slides.³² Lecturers often used films to both emphasise their messages and attract listeners. The New Zealand Salvation Army was quick to take up films as part of their struggle against sin in general, and drunken sin in particular. Major Joseph Perry of the Salvation Army made many films in New Zealand and toured them throughout the early 1900s in the service of the Army's 'Good Fight'.³³ These shows combined band music, lantern slides and moving pictures.³⁴ Viewers seemed to admire the variety of pictures shown along with the music from the highly drilled musicians.³⁵ In fact, some may have felt the moving pictures to be far more entertaining than the lectures that accompanied them.

Figure 1.2 shows a contemporary light-hearted view of the relative attractions of improving lectures and moving pictures. While many may have heard lectures such as the Salvation Army's as uplifting



Figure 1.2: The caption reads: 'Cadet (at the Drill Hall, after the pictures had been rung off for speeches): Get, boys, get! They think they've got us here to work off a prohibition lecture on us. It's deadly'. Any moving pictures were far more interesting than any improving lecture for some New Zealanders.

New Zealand Observer (NZO), 28 October 1905, p.12.

Cadet (at the Drill Hall, after the pictures had been rung off for speeches): Get, boys, get! They think they've got us here to work off a Prohibition lecture on us. It's deadly

adjuncts to moving pictures, some may have been more interested in the pictures than the sounds of these cinematic events. The cartoon also humorously illustrated that the message of temperance, as delivered through multimedia exhibitions of sound and moving vision, may have sometimes fallen on deaf ears.

It is difficult to know just how lecturers incorporated films into their presentations. Did they speak continuously over the films? Were the films before, after or during their speeches? Magic lantern slides could be held as long as needed to make a point but film images continuously flowed past the audience. The moving pictures could not be paused as the film might melt or burst into flame if stopped too long. This made long explanations about particular scenes or moments very difficult to manage while the film played.

The roles of lecturers and actors in narrating films in New Zealand and elsewhere seem to have died away by the early 1910s although the tradition became well established in other countries.³⁶ This decline may be attributed to the rise of intertitles and the increasingly sophisticated visual narratives employed by film-makers.³⁷ But an equally important factor was the music that was used to underpin, amplify and comment on the meanings of the pictures.

Some musical practices of the silent film era bridged the gap between musician and audience by including the film viewers in the music. Illustrated songs were one form of such acoustic inclusiveness. These had been popular since the mid-1890s and involved lantern slides of lyrics and suitable scenes illustrating songs.³⁸ Most film projectors had

attachments that allowed them to project slides so these songs were common features of the early film shows in New Zealand that were parts of variety acts.³⁹ Illustrated songs often involved audience participation at least during the chorus sections of the music. In 1905, Major Perry's Biorama Company attracted over a thousand people to Greymouth's Opera House with films, the Biorama Band and some singers. The songs included sentimental favourites such as *The Forger's Daughter* and *Please Mr Conductor Don't Put Me Off the Train*, and featured 'simply beautiful' illustrations with 'the chorus of each song thrown on the screen and the vast audience joined in the singing'.⁴⁰ The audience at New Plymouth's Opera House enjoyed the films of Richardson's Entertainers in 1908. This show also featured illustrated songs, 'a form of instructive entertainment that is growing in popularity', and the audience 'heartily joined in the chorus to *Red Wing* and *The Man Who Fights the Fire*'.⁴¹ The slides were made in America and Britain and this occasionally undermined the effects of the songs when they were performed in New Zealand. One reviewer noted that 'soldier songs of the Goodbye, I'm-going-to-get-shot style are always illustrated in New Zealand with American soldier pictures which is a big mistake'.⁴²



Figure 1.3: A cartoon that played on the popularity of illustrated songs. Two out of pocket but happily liquored racing punters sing as they wait for a ferry from Takapuna to Auckland. The song title referred to a contemporary comedic hit based on a sentimental traditional ballad.

New Zealand Observer, 7 December 1907, p.5.

MODERN SONGS ILLUSTRATED.

"We Parted on the Shore," as sung by distressed punters coming from the Takapuna races.

Despite this, the illustrated songs were popular in New Zealand. Illustration 1.3 shows a contemporary cartoon that played on their popularity.

The song *We Parted on the Shore* was a traditional ballad that the popular comic singer Harry Lauder made into a hit by adding to it a large slab of faux Scottish patter and outrageously rolled rrrrrr's at every chance. Lauder released sheet music versions, recordings and even made a short synchronised sound Chronophone film of the song.⁴³ *We Parted on the Shore* had also been part of the *Mother Goose* show in 1907 that had been very popular in New Zealand. It used slides to illustrate the song.⁴⁴ In addition, the cartoon played on the sentimental nature of many illustrated songs. Parting lovers, orphaned children and family life were favourite topics for many illustrated songs; the titles mentioned above all fall into one of these categories. Even the comedy songs tended not to feature racing and drinking as their topics. The songs were generally 'familiar, sentimental nostalgic, patriotic'.⁴⁵ The cartoon undermined this by reframing a local scene involving drink and gambling as an illustrated song. Both the choice of song title and mention of 'modern songs illustrated' played on the cartoon's viewers' familiarity with both contemporary technology, and the latest hit music, while at the same time gently satirising both.

Illustrated songs encouraged audience participation and noise. This was controlled participation. The singers on stage took the lead with the audience usually joining in the chorus. The words heard were those that were projected on the screen. However, not all audience noises could be controlled so easily.

An article by Reynold Ayers of Wanganui that appeared in a New Zealand film magazine in 1921 listed some 'don'ts for movie goers'. Many of these prohibitions were to do with noise. The article's author enjoined people not to talk too loudly, whistle, stamp their feet when the projector broke down, hiss or jeer villains, eat sweets noisily, shriek with laughter, pass remarks if a child cried in the theatre, and finally, not to argue with their neighbour about an actor's abilities and clothes.⁴⁶ Ayers' article, while light hearted, indicated that audience noise could be a problem during silent films. By the time the article was written, most films were being seen in dedicated cinemas, and the protocols that had applied to audience behaviour at variety shows in theatres no longer applied. In fact, the behaviour suggested in the article was more appropriate to a concert of classical music or a 'serious' play rather than the vaudeville milieu of early film viewing in New Zealand.

It is hard to recover the sounds made by New Zealand film audience members before the Talkies.⁴⁷ Applause, laughter, whistles, and uproar when projection equipment broke down seem to have been just some of the elements involved. Mark Griffen remembered silent films in Foxton as noisy affairs with heroes cheered and villains 'soundly hooted' to the point where the manager would stop the show whereupon the 'return to quietness was instantaneous'.⁴⁸ Film screenings at Kawhia included people singing all through the films and abuse aimed at anyone who blocked the screen.⁴⁹ Children's matinees were often very noisy from start to finish and the cinema pianist Henry Shirley used them mainly as opportunities to practice the piano.⁵⁰ Silent film audiences were sometimes very noisy. But this depended on the context.

New Zealand audiences who watched films of the South African War in 1900 tended to be quite vocal. Audience members at these screenings often reacted loudly to the images with 'young patriots distinguishing themselves by their expressions of approval of friends and disapproval of their enemies'.⁵¹ Cheers, boos, applause, catcalls and singing were often part of these shows.⁵² Just 16 years later, films of the fighting during the Battle of the Somme were shown in New Zealand to audiences who seem to have sat in silence. The British audiences who saw the films about the Battle of the Somme observed an uncharacteristic silence for much of it although some scenes provoked some cheering.⁵³ It is clear that music was heard during New Zealand screenings of the films but there is little evidence to suggest how loud or quiet local audiences were when they saw these films.⁵⁴ Given that the First World War lasted much longer than the South African War and that New Zealand sustained very high casualties, it may be that the vaunted realism of the Somme films led to them being watched in a sort of respectful silence similar to that observed by British audiences. Another factor that might lead to such an assessment is that by 1916, films were mainly seen in dedicated cinemas rather than in variety theatres or halls. A 1915 account of a New Zealand cinema described the audience following 'the drama with breathless interest'.⁵⁵

By the early 1920s it seems that silence on the part of cinema audiences may have been expected. However, the need for Ayers to draw attention to this, even with a light tone, indicates that this was not always observed. Whether it was music, sound effects, lectures or the people around them, New Zealand filmgoers during the silent era had much to listen to. There was a wide variety of sounds produced in a wide variety of ways and these were often different from one screening

to another. Improvisation often produced the sounds of silent cinema. In one sense, this means that musicians like Henry Shirley and countless other cinema pianists played without a score as they improvised to the images on the screen. Even if there was a score orchestras would often have to modify it to suit their musical resources. But improvisation was also part of the experience as films became part of everyday life. Should audience members make sounds? When? Should sounds by the musicians be applauded? How were the sounds related to the moving images? These are just some of the questions raised by the sounds of the silent cinemas.

This exploration of just one area of the extremely varied soundscape of early cinema is intended to question the writing of local film history as a triumphant progress from flawed, primitive, silent beginnings to a sophisticated and perfected present with the advent of the talkies positioned as a revolutionary lynchpin. The human voice is just one strand from the rich polyphony of New Zealand's cinematic history and there remains much more yet to be hearkened to.

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