

TITLE: The Adventures of Jonathan Dennis, founding director of the New Zealand Film Archive Ngā Kaitiaki o Ngā Taonga Whitiāhua (NZFA)

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ABSTRACT: Jonathan Spencer Dennis (b.1953 d.2002) was the director of the NZFA in its first decade (1981 -1990). A passionate cinéaste, Dennis was proud to have met Lillian Gish, to be friends with Kenneth Anger and to be guided by the advice of Len Lye and Mary Meerson. He studied at the 1979 FIAF Summer School in East Berlin and the BFI (at that time called the British National Film Archive). He also worked at the British National Film Theatre during an extensive study tour of Europe and North America. Yet in the first few years of the Archive's development, something happened which drew the organization away from its early influences. Witarina Te Miriarangi Parewahaika Harris (nee Mitchell b.1906 d.2007) star of the 1929 film *The Devil's Pit* aka *Under the Southern Cross* (Dir. Collins, L. Universal Studios) became Dennis' friend and the first kaumātua (elder) of the Archive. She guided Dennis to engage with the iwi of the motu (the people of the country) so that a new type of archive firmly embedded in the traditions of the South Pacific was able to develop.

Along the way there was great tension as power imbalances within society were reflected within the Institution's walls. In turn this tension led to a new creativity, a recognition of the potential of the Archive which incorporated its spiritual as well as intellectual and historical value. Under Dennis' and Harris' influence The New Zealand Film Archive began to evolve into *Ngā Kaitiaki o Ngā Taonga Whitiāhua: The Guardians of the Treasured Images of Light*.

¹ Thesis entitled: *The Adventures of Jonathan Dennis: a study of the life and work of the founding director of The New Zealand Film Archive Ngā Kaitiaki o Ngā Taonga Whitiāhua/ The Guardians of the Treasured Images of Light*.

In 1979 Jonathan Dennis wrote to his parents after visiting kinetic artist Len Lye in New York. In an apparent afterthought to his description of Lye's studio and the conversation they had he adds: "Oh – I've been accepted for an archive summer school in East Berlin in August – held every 2 years, [with] only 25 people [accepted]. It's getting a bit serious all this archiving now which is a drag..."² The Federation Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF) Summer School in 1979 was to be a very important event for Dennis. Although he says the archiving was "a drag" it's clear that he was enthusiastic about working with film and recovering archival materials to preserve and present to audiences. Dennis' offhand comment is a reminder that at this time he was only 26 years old. In the late 1970s he and his partner Ferry Hendriks travelled across North America and Europe in order for Dennis to train as a film archivist.³ Dennis always told the story in future years of visiting the Paris Cinémathèque where he met Mary Meerson:

*...Mary continually talked about films as living objects [and] that for them to have a life they had to be in front of people. It was people that brought them to life and if you didn't show them... it was of no value. You had to put them in front of people.*⁴

The "living" aspect of the films as well as the question Lye had asked him in a letter; "will the archive support creativity?" were guiding principles for Dennis for the rest of his life. Yet other influences closer to home were to become equally important. Dennis was a Pākehā (European born in New Zealand) who was guided from the early 1980s by a Māori woman (tribal affiliation to Ngāti Whakāue of the Te Arawa waka) who had starred in a 1929 film. Witarina Harris was in her mid seventies when she and Dennis met following the rediscovery via FIAF contacts in the United States of the film which came to be known as *The Devil's Pit*.⁵ Her story was fascinating to Dennis who was only then just beginning to learn about Te Ao Māori (the Māori world).⁶ As a young woman Harris had been working as a typist at the Māori Arts and Crafts School in her hometown of Rotorua when she was asked to star in a film.⁷ The movie was part of a craze in the 1920s and '30s for exotic South Sea Island adventures made for North American and European markets. They tended to focus on exploiting the novel elements of the landscape - the bubbling geysers and hot water pools of Rotorua and the idea of "Māoriland" and its exotic inhabitants.⁸ Following the release of the film Harris worked, married and raised a family for many years in the capital city Wellington, involving herself voluntarily in language and cultural activities. By the time she returned to live in Rotorua a counter culture had arrived in New Zealand. Emeritus Professor of Film TV and Media Studies Roger Horrocks described the 1970s as a significant time: "Film had a particularly important role to play because of its reach... These were years of activism in politics as well as art, a time of Vietnam War protests, Māori activism, feminism and

² Jonathan Dennis, Letters to his parents MS 9114-08. Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand.

³ Dennis was guided in his choice of destinations by a report written by Ray Edmondson, a film archivist at the National Library in Australia at Canberra. Edmondson's report of a trip to North America and Europe and the learnings he had gleaned were taken to heart by film archivist Clive Sowry and shared with Dennis (Jonathan Dennis interview with Diane Pivac 28 January 2000 New Zealand Film Archive NZFA ACCN AUD 0672).

⁴ Jonathan Dennis interviewed by Diane Pivac 28 January 2000 *ibid*.

⁵ Also known as *Under the Southern Cross* and *Taranga*. Directed by Lew Collins for Universal. (Sam Edwards & Helen Martin, *New Zealand Film 1912-1996*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1997 p.42).

⁶ Peter Wells' documentary film *Friendship is the Harbour of Joy* (2004) depicts the friendship of Harris and Dennis in great detail at the time Dennis is dying of cancer. In this film Dennis describes his growing awareness of the Māori world over the course of his life.

⁷ Patricia Grace, Irihapeti Ramsden, Jonathan Dennis, *The Silent Migration Ngāti Pōneke Young Māori Club 1937-1948*, Wellington, Huia Press, 2001 pp. 24,25.

⁸ Diane Pivac, Frank Stark, Lawrence McDonald, *New Zealand Film; An Illustrated History In Association with the Film Archive*, Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2011 pp. 60,61.

gay rights. More generally, the young took revenge upon the staid values of their parents' generation, challenging conservative New Zealand..."⁹

As part of this activism Pākehā film maker John O'Shea and Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay (tribal affiliations to Ngāti Apa) as well as Pākehā historian Michael King instigated the 1974 television series *Tangata Whenua* (People of the Land). *Tangata Whenua* is regarded as "one of the most important documentary series not only of the 1970s but also of New Zealand film history in general."¹⁰ The series "...paved the way for subsequent developments in Māori film making and gave Pākehā a view into hitherto hidden worlds."¹¹ The NZFA was to become the repository for the series in the 1980s. *Tangata Whenua* was considered a bicultural endeavor using Māori principles as far as it was deemed possible at the time but Barclay became increasingly uneasy about the copyright of the images in *Tangata Whenua*.¹² He was concerned by how those images could be used after he was no longer able to exert influence over the Archive in which they were held - he wanted recognition of the films as *ngā taonga*. Professor of Museum Studies Paul Tapsell (Tribal affiliations to Te Arawa) describes the term *taonga* as:

*...any item, object or thing that represents the ancestral identity of a Māori kin group (whanau, hapu or iwi) in relation to particular lands and resources...They are seen as the spiritual personifications of particular ancestors, either as direct images or through association. Descendants experience this wairua (ancestral spirit) as ihi (presence), wehi (awe) and wana (authority). Thus taonga are time travellers that bridge the generations, enabling descendants to ritually meet their ancestors face to face.*¹³

This understanding of an 'object' as carrying the ancestral spirit offers a very different conception of the material in a museum, archive or art gallery to that understood by most Pākehā curators who see their collections as containing discrete items to be catalogued and preserved in climate controlled environments which ensure the physical decay of the object is slowed or stopped. A *taonga* has a spiritual engagement with the whānau, hapū or iwi from whence it came. It involves understanding ones role as a 'kaitiki' (guardian). The concept *taonga* makes manifest a reciprocal and ongoing relationship between present, past and future. In the 1970s and '80s young urban Māori "...increasingly critical of images of themselves as "primitive" rural folk living in the past"¹⁴ knew that their relationship with *ngā taonga tuku iho* was more dynamic and reciprocal than the predominantly Pākehā museums, art galleries and archives seemed to recognise.

The New Zealand Film Archive was founded in 1981 - the same year as the Springbok tour of New Zealand which caused protests across the country described as "...nation-splitting..."¹⁵ According to his diary, Jonathan Dennis attended at least one Wellington protest on 1st May 1981.¹⁶ The protests began as an all white Apartheid era South African national rugby team came

⁹ R. Horrocks in Pivac, Stark & McDonald 2011 op cit p.11.

¹⁰ L.McDonald in Pivac, Stark & McDonald, 2011 op.cit. p.163.

¹¹ L. McDonald, 2011, *ibid*.

¹² Barry Barclay later encouraged the NZFA to use the concept of "mana tuturu" ("what is right" in relation to spiritual guardianship) in its agreements with Māori to ensure the spiritual aspect often removed in Pākehā and European practice remained attached to the materials in the archive (Barry Barclay, *Mana Tuturu: Maori Treasures and Intellectual Property Rights*, 2005, Auckland: Auckland University Press., p.96.)

¹³ Peter Tapsell, *Ko Tawa: Māori Treasures of New Zealand*, Auckland: David Bateman, 2006, p.17 translation Tapsell's.

¹⁴ Conal McCarthy, *Museums and Māori; Heritage Professionals Indigenous Collections Current Practice*, Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2011, p.36.

¹⁵ Bruce Babington in Pivac, Stark & McDonald 2011 op.cit. p.202.

¹⁶ NZFA Personal Papers Jonathan Dennis Box 20 (uncatalogued).

to tour the country and play the All Blacks, the national New Zealand team. The protests encouraged a wide and passionate debate about the role of politics in sport and Pākehā responsibilities for the colonial occupation of the country. Māori scholar and activist Ranginui Walker (tribal affiliation to Whakatohea) remembered:

*In Māori politics, it was an important moment as Māori and Pākehā joined together in public protest. In the wake of the tour, an argument adopted by some – that Māori should not be reliant on Pākehā and that Pākehā had no role in Māori political campaigns – gained ground.*¹⁷

The “argument adopted by some” is articulated in Merata Mita’s film of the Springbok Protests *Patu!* (Dir. M.Mita, 1983) in which we see some Māori ask Pākehā why they are willing to stand up for the rights of Black South Africans when they had never protested the inequities of the indigenous peoples of the country in which they lived. This film used footage Mita and others had shot which she collected and edited together.¹⁸ Jonathan Dennis and the New Zealand Film Archive were to become kaitiaki (guardians) of *Patu!* Dennis was responsible for managing distribution, income and screenings of the film and continued in that role after he left the Archive.¹⁹

Barclay remembered: “During the 1980s, a very significant contest developed within the archive, a struggle of conscience, if you like, in which there were many players, to all of whom we are greatly indebted.”²⁰ The issues raised in Mita’s *Patu!* and exemplified by Ranginui Walker’s ‘argument developed by some’ were indicative of the debates, tensions and difficulties at the NZFA as attempts were made to move towards an incorporation of Māori perspectives during the 1980s.

As Jonathan Dennis and the NZFA prepared a catalogue of sixty films with indigenous content to accompany the seminal *Te Māori* exhibition²¹ to the United States, Dennis articulated the difficulty of ensuring appropriate practice which could honour the Māori perspective as well as satisfy European archiving protocols in his report to the FIAF Congress in 1988:

*With regard to the New Zealand Film Archive Māori material, most progress was achieved in the area of basic descriptive cataloguing...However the success of these initial innovations tend to suggest that this process cannot be sustained in isolation and that the inability of present cataloguing philosophy and practice to acknowledge the contribution and status of indigenous peoples ought to become the subject of much larger and more vigorous debate.*²²

In presentations of the films Dennis was able to follow the lead of elders such as Witarina Harris. But Harris was not an archivist; she was not in a position to advise him on the appropriate

¹⁷ Walker quoted in Paul Spoonley, 2009, *Mata Toa: The Life and Times of Ranginui Walker*, Auckland: Penguin p.109.

¹⁸ Those involved included film coordinators Gaylene Preston, Gerd Pohlmann and Martyn Sanderson. Photographers were Barry Harbet, W. Attewell, C. Barrett, A. Barry, J. Bartle, A. Bollinger, P. Carvell, R. Donaldson, M. Fingel, E. Frizzell, C. Ghent, A. Guilford, R. Long, Leon Narbey, R. Prosser, and M. Single (S. Edwards & H. Martin, 1997 op.cit p.91). Many of these people were or went on to become prominent in the film industry in NZ and/or overseas.

¹⁹ NZFA Jonathan Dennis Personal Papers Box 11 distribution and correspondence regarding *Patu!* in folder labelled ‘Merata’ (papers uncatalogued). *Patu!* has been registered as a UNESCO NZ Memory of the World <http://www.unescomow.org.nz/new-zealand-register/browse>. With thanks to Ray Edmondson for alerting me to this fact.

²⁰ Barry Barclay, 2005 op.cit. p.103.

²¹ This exhibition of Māori carvings was influential on Pākehā and Māori practice in New Zealand and has been described in various publications including Conal McCarthy’s excellent book *Museums and Māori*, ibid.

²² Jonathan Dennis, NZFA Report to FIAF Congress Paris, 1988.

cataloguing or long term preservation of the films in the care of the NZFA. These concerns were not resolved by the time Dennis resigned from the Archive, and in fact these ongoing difficulties were part of the reason he departed from the Archive.²³

Dennis was able to continue to engage with indigenous materials through the 1980s because Witarina Harris supported his work. The support of a Māori elder was his entrée into Māori communities. Seeing local responses to films with Witarina Harris at the *Festiv'Art Rotorua Arts Festival* in 1984 had a great impact on the Archive's direction:

*When I arrived in Rotorua Witarina had arranged for us to do a screening for some Te Arawa [the local tribe]. We did a private screening and all the old people came. It was the first time we had shown the films in that context. I took some to a private home that night, and when we showed the films at the festival, hundreds of people came. It was quite extraordinary.*²⁴

Dennis described the "...terrific sense of excitement at being able to greet these images. It was like a whole tribe and city's home movies had been returned, were now known about and accessible (even though still only through the Archive). The occasion was deeply felt by both Māori and European alike..."²⁵ Harris' knowledge and tribal based relationships afforded Dennis many advantages and opportunities he would not otherwise have had. But ultimately as younger activists began to pressure cultural heritage institutions, it became clear that Harris' support was not enough. The younger generations were not content to work in a supporting capacity to Pākehā.²⁶

The Film Archive responded to challenges from Māori by inviting Annie Collins, editor of *Patu!* and anti racism trainer with the organization *Pākehās Against Racism* to carry out workshops with the staff. After the training, the rewritten Constitution/Kaupapa of the Archive was published in 1988 and was intended as the first step towards a restructured Archive with an evenly split Māori and Pākehā Board. In addition the name of the Archive was changed from *The New Zealand Film Archive* to *The New Zealand Film Archive Ngā Kaitiaki O Ngā Taonga Whitiāhua* (The Guardians of the Treasured Images of Light).²⁷ The new Kaupapa incorporated indigenous rights into its infrastructure and acknowledged the rights of the materials *themselves* – recognising them as *ngā taonga*, living entities with relationships. The Kaupapa still operates at the NZFA today.²⁸

In his final FIAF report in 1990 Dennis echoed Meerson's advice on the living nature of the Archive when he said that the Kaupapa was the first "...major step toward becoming an institution that is fully bi-cultural in image and practice [and this] has affected every level of the Archive and has given a place to stand on issues confronting our operation and activities. While sometimes progress toward real structured change – at staffing and Board levels particularly –

²³ Jonathan Dennis interview with Diane Pivac, 2000 *ibid*.

²⁴ Jonathan Dennis, *The Process of Change at the New Zealand Film Archive/Nga Kaitiaki o Nga Taonga Whitiāhua*, AGMANZ Art Galleries and Museums Association of New Zealand Journal 1989 Volume 20 Issue 1 pp. 10,11.

²⁵ Jonathan Dennis, *The Process of Change at the New Zealand Film Archive...* 1989, *ibid*.

²⁶ Jonathan Dennis, *Uncovering and Releasing the Images - the case of Ethnological Film*, Ottawa, Canada: National Archives of Canada, 1990, p.4.

²⁷ Jonathan Dennis, NZFA Report to FIAF Congress 1987.

²⁸ The Kaupapa is accessible on the NZFA website www.filmarchive.org.nz

has seemed slow, the commitment has not waived....This Film Archive is, we hope, a living archive and we want to keep it that way.”²⁹

²⁹ Jonathan Dennis, NZFA report to FIAF Congress, 1990.