The New Zealand Dressmaker: 
Experiences, Practices and Contribution to Fashionability, 
1940 to 1980.

A thesis submitted in (partial) fulfilment of the requirements for 
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Jan Hamon
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother Mary Hamon (1931 – 2006).
TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE

DECLARATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

ABSTRACT 1

CHAPTER ONE 3

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction 3
  1.1.1 The Dressmaker in the Context of this Study 7
  1.1.2 Aim and Time Scale of the Study 8
1.2 Personal Interest 10
1.3 Research Questions 12
1.4 Organisation of the Research 12

CHAPTER TWO 17

LITERATURE AND METHOD

2.1 Context 17
2.2 Literature Review 20
  2.2.1 The Study of Women’s History in New Zealand 20
  2.2.2 Historical Studies on New Zealand Women From the 1940s to the 1980s 21
  2.2.3 The Importance of the Popular Press 23
  2.2.4 The Search for New Zealand Dressmakers 25
  2.2.5 Pre-colonial / Colonial Period 27
  2.2.6 Into the Twentieth Century - pre World War Two 30
  2.2.7 World War Two and Beyond 33
  2.2.8 International Comparisons 39
  2.2.9 Conclusion 41
2.3 Methodology 42
  2.3.1 Sources of the Research 44
  2.3.1.1 Primary Research 44
  2.3.1.2 Secondary Research 45
  2.3.2 The Collection and Analysis of Oral (Life) History Narratives 45
  2.3.3 Recording Oral History Narratives in New Zealand Studies 48
  2.3.4 Locating and Selecting the Dressmakers 49
  2.3.5 The Interview Questions 51
2.4 Limitations 55
CHAPTER THREE
HISTORY AND CONTEXT

3.1 Nineteenth Century
3.2 Twentieth Century
3.3 Factors Unique to New Zealand

CHAPTER FOUR
COLONIAL SETTLEMENT IN NEW ZEALAND

4.1 Missionary Wives
4.2 Colonial Settlement
4.3 Maintaining the Wardrobe
4.4 Dressmakers

CHAPTER FIVE
CLOTHING AND TEXTILES; ESTABLISHING AN INFRASTRUCTURE

5.1 Setting the Contemporary Context in New Zealand
5.2 Competition; Retail, Mail Order, and Manufacturing
5.2.1 Retail Opportunities
5.2.1.1 The Establishment of the Major Department Stores
5.2.2 Mail Order Opportunities
5.2.3 Manufacturing Opportunities
5.3 Resources
5.3.1 Textiles
5.3.2 Haberdashery
5.3.3 Equipment
5.3.4 Patterns
5.3.5 Magazines
5.4 Education and Training
5.5 Business Development

CHAPTER SIX
THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR TWO

6.1 New Zealand At War
6.2 Home and Family
6.3 Wartime Employment of Women
6.4 The Impact of the War on the Production of Clothing
6.5 Austerity Measures
6.6 Comparing New Zealand to Britain and Australia

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE DRESSMAKERS

7.1 The Dressmakers: Background and Training
| Chapter One | Image One: | Dressmakers’ picnic | 16 |
| Chapter Two | Image Two: | After Six exhibition flyer | 59 |
|             | Image Three: | New Zealand Graphic fashion | 60 |
|             | Image Four: | New Zealand Graphic joke | 61 |
|             | Image Five: | New Zealand Woman’s Weekly cover | 62 |
|             | Image Six: | Australian Home Journal cover | 63 |
| Chapter Three | Image Seven: | The needlewoman at home and abroad | 86 |
|             | Image Eight: | Emigration and New Zealand | 87 |
|             | Image Nine: | Immigration and domestic servants | 88 |
| Chapter Four | Image Ten: | The stone store | 108 |
|             | Image Eleven: | Early Auckland | 109 |
|             | Image Twelve: | Washday | 110 |
|             | Image Thirteen: | The sewing machine | 111 |
|             | Image Fourteen: | Needlemoney | 112 |
|             | Image Fifteen: | A tailor’s workroom | 113 |
| Chapter Five | Image Sixteen: | Kirkcaldie and Stains | 144 |
|             | Image Seventeen: | Drapery and millinery departments | 145 |
|             | Image Eighteen: | Milne and Choyce | 146 |
|             | Image Nineteen: | Smith and Caughey | 147 |
|             | Image Twenty: | Farmers catalogue | 148 |
|             | Image Twenty-One: | Farmers catalogue two | 149 |
|             | Image Twenty-Two: | Poverty Bay Herald advertisements | 150 |
|             | Image Twenty-Three: | Vogue pattern cover | 151 |
|             | Image Twenty-Four: | Mail order pattern | 152 |
|             | Image Twenty-Five: | New Zealand Woman’s Weekly pattern page | 153 |
|             | Image Twenty-Six: | Druleigh patternmaking book cover | 154 |
| Chapter Six | Image Twenty-Seven: | Hints for recycling clothing during World War Two | 179 |
|             | Image Twenty-Eight: | Women working in munitions during World War Two | 180 |
|             | Image Twenty-Nine: | Women sewing battledress during World War Two | 181 |
|             | Image Thirty: | Examples of wartime fashions | 182 |
|             | Image Thirty-One: | 1948 fashions at Randwick races | 183 |
|             | Image Thirty-Two: | Dressmaker-made linen suits | 184 |
|             | Image Thirty-Three: | 1948 fashions in Sydney | 185 |
| Chapter Seven | Image Thirty-Four: | Hollywood School of Dressmaking rulers | 225 |
|             | Image Thirty-Five: | Dressmaker MH’s measurement book | 226 |
|             | Image Thirty-Six: | Advisory and promotional leaflets | 227 |
|             | Image Thirty-Seven: | Dressmaker garments from the 1950s | 228 |
|             | Image Thirty-Eight: | 1948 wedding gown | 229 |
|             | Image Thirty-Nine: | 1950s bride and bridesmaid | 230 |
|             | Image Forty: | 1950 wedding group | 231 |
|             | Image Forty-One: | 1960s wedding gown | 232 |
Image Forty-Two: A wedding gown from 1968
Image Forty-Three: 1960 bride and flowergirl
Image Forty-Four: 1951 bridesmaid’s dress

**Chapter Eight**

Image Forty-Five: Dress pattern for a 1950s sundress
Image Forty-Six: Dress patterns from the 1960s
Image Forty-Seven: Benson and Hedges Fashion Design Awards entries
Image Forty-Nine: A gown by Annie Bonza
Image Fifty: Sketches by Bruce Papas
Image Fifty-One: A gown by Vinka Lucas
Image Fifty-Two: ‘Stardust’ by Michael Mattar
Image Fifty-Three: ‘Maritza’ by Sissel Berjck
Image Fifty-Four: Outfit from the Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection
Image Fifty-Five: Outfit from the Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection
Image Fifty-Six: Outfit from the Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection
Image Fifty-Seven: 1950s fashion in a Gisborne street
Image Fifty-Eight: 1950s fashion at an agricultural show
Image Fifty-Nine: 1955 bridesmaid’s dress
Image Sixty: 1949 wedding dress
Image Sixty-One: 1962 wedding dress
Image Sixty-Two: The fabric department of Kirkcaldie and Stains

**Chapter Nine**

Image Sixty-Three: A dressmaker in her own wedding gown
ABSTRACT

The rationale behind this research grew from a perception that, historically, work that was seen to be “women’s work” was undervalued or unrecognised, particularly if the work was closely associated with domesticity or the exclusively feminine. Local and international interest in New Zealand fashion designers in the late twentieth century spawned a series of articles about their successes, but with little reference to the history of New Zealand dressmaking and “fashion”. The researcher was interested in what had gone before; in the stories of the skilled and talented dressmakers who had brought clothing and perhaps “fashion” to everyday women, before the advent of the contemporary designers. Based on the researcher’s own family experiences, there was a belief that interesting and valuable stories awaited investigation.

The aim of this project was to tell the stories of these women and, in doing so, to seek and examine evidence that the practice of dressmaking provided a significant alternative source of clothing and/or fashion that existed alongside a diverse “fashion” industry. It also proposed to consider how the dressmakers’ expertise, nurtured and maintained in a female “domestic” activity carried out in an unbroken tradition, might have contributed to the “fashionability” of New Zealand women. A study was to be made of the work of “home” dressmakers in New Zealand during and following World War Two, with a view to documenting the position of these practitioners as contributors to the history of New Zealand fashion. Practitioners who worked in New Zealand during the defined timeframe were interviewed and their actual experiences provided the primary research focus for the study.

This thesis then, considers the broader historical context, including any relevant factors that allowed dressmaking, as an occupation or a business, to flourish in New Zealand during this
timeframe. The skills of tailors, dressmakers and seamstresses were in great demand from the earliest days of colonial settlement in the nineteenth century (Ebbett, 1997; Pearce, 1982), and the subsequent economic and social environment supported the furtherance of the occupation of dressmaker well into the twentieth century. This study takes, as its focus, the work of women who made women’s clothes, generally from their own homes or small business premises, and particularly during the period from the 1940s to the 1980s. The research concentrates on the social and economic environment in which the dressmakers worked, their rationale for establishing their businesses; the skills and knowledge that they acquired and utilised; the extent of their production; and the manufacturing and retail opportunities that existed in competition to them.

The thesis concludes with an evaluation of the significance of the dressmakers’ contribution to “fashion” in New Zealand and an assessment of the continuation of the tradition of dressmaking in today’s world. It finds that the skills and business acumen displayed by “home” dressmakers has resulted in a strong and individual tradition of special skills which have maintained an influence throughout the twentieth century. It argues that this retention and dissemination of skills and knowledge has been of value to the establishment of small specialist fashion labels in New Zealand. Most recent findings show that a number of these labels have achieved international recognition and considerable growth in exports to international markets. Mainly as a result of the dressmakers’ demonstrated emphasis on cut, fit, detail and individuality, evidence from current practitioners suggests that dressmakers have been influential in establishing a heritage of skills and knowledge, and have deservedly secured a place in the history of the New Zealand fashion industry.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

As early as December 1829 Mrs Henry Williams of Paihia (Bay of Islands) could write of a girls’ sewing class in her school where the pupils made gowns, shirts, frocks, trousers, flannels and even a boy’s jacket (Ebbett, 1977, p.1).

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The knowledge and utilisation of dressmaking skills in New Zealand pre-dates the history of colonial settlement that began in the 1840s. From 1814, the wives of the first missionaries to New Zealand took responsibility for the maintenance of the wardrobes of their families, and taught the local Maori women “the use of a needle” (Woodhouse, 1940). During the 1830s, the standard of needlework achieved by the Maori girls at the Paihia school, was considered to be very high. The Spicer Collection of early New Zealand clothing includes the wedding dress of mission wife, Mary Ann Preece, made by her pupils at the Paihia school, and other superb garments that demonstrate their skills.

The colonisation of New Zealand from 1840 onwards was part of a nineteenth century tide of emigration that had seen a long period of departure from England, Ireland and Scotland to British possessions overseas. Prior colonisation of Canada, the West Indies, and Australia provided some insight into preparation and provisioning for the comparatively late settlement of New Zealand (Drummond, 1967). The New Zealand Company, established in Britain in the 1830s to instigate settlement in New Zealand, provided its settlers with manuals for guidance in the selection of items to be brought to the new colony. G. B. Earp, in his 1849 Hand-Book For Intending Emigrants to the Southern Settlements of New Zealand, provided lists for the complete colonists’
outfits; the lists of requirements varying considerably in length between that of a labouring man and his wife to that of a gentleman and lady. However, in both cases, the women were urged to bring tapes, needles, thread, and other haberdashery items.

Ebbett (1977) and Pearce (1982) suggest that the skills of tailors, seamstresses and dressmakers were in great demand in colonial New Zealand in the 1850s and 1860s. Skilled needlewomen were recruited for the colony from Britain and, “although many seamstresses were busily employed, the demand for their services was such that there never seemed to be enough of them” (Pearce, 1982, p.170).

Census recordsiii show that, in nineteenth century New Zealand, only domestic service exceeded sewing as the greatest source of income-earning employment for women. However, the precise number of women working in this field at any given time is difficult to quantify, given that marriage, childbirth, and domestic duties could cause women to cease the work for periods of time (Malthus, 1991). By the end of the nineteenth century it was possible to identify emerging categories of dressmaking: independent dressmaking businesses, dressmaking attached to drapery and department stores, and the itinerant or home dressmaker (Malthus, 1992).iv

The establishment and growth of the major department stores in New Zealand from the 1860s led to the employment of large numbers of dressmakers in their workrooms. Kirkcaldie and Stains Limited, established in Wellington in 1863, imported much of their stock as bulk materials, “which was made up by large numbers of employees in the tailoring, dressmaking and millinery workrooms upstairs, or by outworkers” (Millen, 2000, pp.31-32). Milne and Choyce Limited, an Auckland drapery opened in 1867, set up its dressmaking department around 1875, with a statement in the local
newspaper in the following year, that a “first-class dress and mantle-maker (was) always on the premises - a fit guaranteed” (Tucker, 1968, p.29).

Mechanisation of the methods of garment manufacture following the availability of the sewing machine in New Zealand from the 1860s, and the rapid expansion of industry, including the clothing industry, in the 1880s, led to many women choosing to work as seamstresses in factories (Olssen, 1995, p.76). However, factory production was unsuitable for women’s fashions of the period, with their requirements of perfect fit and lavish decoration. Late Victorian and Edwardian women who wished to conform to fashion had to endure endless fittings with the dressmaker and possibly preferred to, to ensure exclusivity of their costumes. Appearing in an elaborate wardrobe was a proclamation of the woman’s social standing, and that of her husband. Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*, written in 1899, argued that women indulged in conspicuous consumption and adopted impractical clothing, in order to demonstrate that the men on whom they were financially dependent were able to support this expenditure.

(To) put the matter in concrete terms: the high heel, the skirt, the impracticable bonnet, the corset, and the general disregard of the wearer’s comfort which is an obvious feature of all civilised women’s apparel, are so many items of evidence to the effect that in the modern civilised scheme of life the woman is still, in theory, the economic dependent of the man,…The homely reason for all this conspicuous leisure and attire on the part of the woman lies in the fact that they are servants to whom, in the differentiation of economic functions, has been delegated the office of putting in evidence their master’s ability to pay (Veblen, 1899, pp. 181-182).³

The opportunity to develop a ready-to-wear market for womenswear was accelerated by the First World War. Coney (1993) suggests that women had no time to be concerned with endless clothes as they moved into employment, and that the number of servants available to care for elaborate clothing was decreasing. The more relaxed fit of suits, blouses and skirts suitable for office and shop work meant that ready-made
outfits could fit a wider range of sizes. For example, a skirt could be sold with an open back seam to allow for fitting by the store’s staff.

Employment outside the home was not considered to be the domain of women, except, perhaps, young women prior to marriage, until well after the Second World War. Society believed that the role of women was to retain responsibility for the home and family, and to step into work roles traditionally performed by men only until the men were released from military service (May, 1992, pp.35-37). Even industrial conscription during the war years avoided enlisting married women until late in the war and then, only those women with no responsibilities for the care of children. The post-war years placed even more emphasis on the home and family and the restoration of domestic harmony, with men cast in the role of income-earner and provider of security and women as the mother and homemaker.

So where does the home dressmaker fit into this post-war world? The contention of the researcher is that a considerable number of women continued to work from their homes or, occasionally, from small business premises, engaged in the manufacture of made-to-measure garments for private clients. It could have been an acceptable way of contributing to the family finances without being seen to threaten the role of husband as provider. It could also have provided a means of support for women with children who were widowed during the war, and, no doubt, a number of women worked in this manner simply because they preferred it to the available employment alternatives, generally of factory and shop work. It could also have been because of their pride in their skills, and their enjoyment of the opportunities to use these skills. One of the aims of this research is to confirm any or all of these possibilities.
1.1.1 The “Dressmaker” in the Context of this Study

The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Brown (ed), 1993) defines a dressmaker as “a person, usually a woman, who makes dresses.” The *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (Summers (ed), 1992) defines a dressmaker as “a person, usually a woman, who makes clothes according to customers’ specific requests.” It goes on to say that, “(f)ew people now have their clothes made by dressmakers as it is much more expensive than buying them...(ready-made).”

In the context of this research, the dressmaker is defined as a person, usually a woman, who made clothes to the order of, and to fit the measurements of, individual clients. The dressmaker worked from her own home or from small business premises. The design of the garments that she made was heavily influenced by existing designs, in the form of examples in magazines or shops, or in dress patterns, and was frequently developed as a result of collaboration between dressmaker and client. The dressmaker was generally a follower of current fashion rather than a design innovator.

A distinction will be made between the “dressmaker” and the “designer”; the latter term having been applied to certain practitioners by the media during the period of study, from the 1940s to the 1980s. Occasionally the media applied both titles to the same practitioner. The blurring of the outlines of the occupations will be addressed in greater depth during the work.

This study will exclude dressmakers and / or designers working for manufacturers, although some of them could have had origins as “home” dressmakers. The focus will be on the manufacture of made-to-measure garments as opposed to ready-made.
The intention is to study the practices of women whose work existed beside the ongoing manufacturing industry. This parameter could include “bespoke” tailors but, in this instance, will not, because tailors were generally men and the focus of the study is to discuss the practices of women. However, reference to male dressmakers might be made if it added to or progressed the study. Ultimately, much of the material included in the study is drawn from the experiences of women who described themselves as dressmakers.

For the purposes of this study, the “fashion industry” refers to the sector of the apparel industry that is involved in the production of garments that are reflective of current fashion trends and, in this instance, is primarily concerned with the production of garments for women. “Fashion” is used in the sense of “the style or the exact shape in dress that is popular at a given time”, vii and “fashionability” refers to “elegance, attractiveness; the quality or state of being in vogue or in conformity with fashion.” viii

1.1.2 Aim and Time Scale of the Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate the stories of a group of women who worked as dressmakers during the period from the 1940s to the 1980s. It intends to evaluate the extent to which such women, during this period, added to the family income, or supported the family, by working at home making clothes for private clients. It would seem that dressmaking was a popular and respected pastime and occupation during this period. A personal memory exists of prizes awarded for excellence in dressmaking at Agricultural and Pastoral Shows around the country, reinforced by the recollections of one of the dressmakers interviewed. Young girls were introduced to the basic sewing skills in compulsory clothing classes at school.
and a number of private colleges advertised dressmaking courses in the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* at least between 1939 and 1951. This widely circulated publication also offered a free pattern service to its subscription readers from at least 1939 to 1955.

The service has been specially designed to meet the requirements of this Dominion. Its aim is to make it possible for New Zealand women to be smartly dressed (*New Zealand Woman’s Weekly*, 4 Dec.1941).\(^{15}\)

Other publications, such as *Australian Home Journal, Woman and Home, My Home,* and the *English Woman’s Weekly* featured fashion and often offered pattern services that provided free or easily accessible patterns. *Burda* and *Enid Gilchrist* pattern books, containing fold-out sheets of patterns that could be traced off, were available from bookstores. Judson (1999, p.14) records that a wide variety of fabric and department stores existed, selling dress fabrics, haberdashery and paper patterns. As the daughter of a practising dressmaker, the researcher’s childhood memories include trips to the fabric stores, the perusing of the pattern books, the unrolling and cutting of lengths of fabric on long tables, and the matching of zips and threads to the fabrics.

The main focus of the investigative study will begin with the period following World War Two. A period when rationing of purchases of new clothing ceased and dress fabrics became readily available again, when husbands and partners did or did not return from war service overseas and when, possibly, women had the time, resources and inclination to be interested in fashion and clothing again. This starting point was also selected because it allowed the possibility of obtaining first-hand accounts from surviving dressmakers. Women who were working during World War Two are in their seventies and eighties now, therefore the likelihood of locating a useful number of dressmakers who practised before this period is reduced due to age factors. The
nature of women’s work changed as a result of wartime demands, further confirming
the logic of this period as a starting point. Investigation will determine whether
dressmaking adapted to conditions during the 1970s when a proliferation of fashion
boutiques, and an abundance of retail opportunities generally, provided for the
differentiated market of fashion for youth and fashion for the generations beyond
youth. The period of investigation will conclude during the 1980s, when deregulation
of the apparel industry led to the importation of a vast range of very affordable
clothing.

Recent research, as discussed later, has recognised the scholarly study of dress as
being of importance in understanding the culture of a society. This study will
concentrate on the social and economic environment in which dressmakers worked. It
will discuss how and why they established their businesses, the skills and knowledge
that they acquired and utilised, the extent of their production, and the significance of
their contribution to the New Zealand apparel industry. The study will explore the
possibility that the traditional crafts and skills inherent in dressmaking have had an
influence on, and have provided a body of resources and knowledge for, current
practitioners in the New Zealand fashion industry. The underlying themes of the
study are assessment of the attribution of value accorded to women’s work, and of the
recognition of the craft and skill inherent in the execution of this type of work in
particular.

1.2 PERSONAL INTEREST

In the year 2000, my mother finally retired from income-earning employment at the
age of sixty-nine. This was a significant event from two perspectives. It was the
culmination of fifty-three years of work, of which approximately twenty-three years
were spent as a professional dressmaker and, many of the balance of years as an occasional dressmaker; a practice that she still pursues, if I am to judge by the pieces of fabric in her sewing room that are obviously not hers.

Retirement also allowed her the opportunity to “sort out” her reasonably large house and its many cupboards. In the process of doing this, she has uncovered dressmaking items of historical interest and fascination. My mother and I have retrieved half-forgotten memories of the occasions, techniques, garment designs, problems and solutions that surround those items. Many of the occasions and techniques are unique to their location and period and, possibly, to the practice of home dressmaking.

My mother’s dressmaking career started in 1946 and ended, as a full-time pursuit, in 1969. It was a period that covered the end of World War Two; a return to femininity in fashion with the introduction of Dior’s “New Look”; a proliferation of weddings as relationships previously interrupted by war were renewed; an emphasis on the home and family in the 1950s, and the changes wrought by the introduction of “Youth Culture” in the 1960s, when fashion became youthful, radical and fun, and the mini skirt was born. She adapted to changes and innovations in machine capabilities, textiles, trimmings and haberdashery, and directions in fashion and was, herself, a well-dressed advertisement for her craft.

I was born into these influences and never entertained the idea of allowing my professional path to follow any other direction than fashion. My mother taught me to sew, initially to make clothes for my dolls, and later, for myself. I studied fashion and textiles at a New Zealand polytechnic and worked in the apparel industry as a designer and patternmaker. I also established my own business, which offered the
services of costume design and production, patternmaking, and the making of original garments for individual clients. Now, as an educator in fashion and costume history, design and construction, I feel privileged to have learnt about such a vital period of fashion history from my mother’s first-hand knowledge and experience. My aim, with this study, is to ensure that the knowledge and experience held by women such as my mother is recorded and, hopefully, enjoyed by twenty-first century students of fashion.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions to be addressed include:

1. What caused the establishment of private dressmaking businesses in New Zealand and why did clients utilise their services during the period from the 1940s to the 1980s?

2. How were these businesses established, promoted, resourced and operated?

3. What specialist skills and knowledge did the dressmakers have and how did they acquire their skills and knowledge?

4. What was the retail and wholesale environment of the period and what impact did private dressmakers have on the retail and wholesale apparel trade?

5. Is the tradition of dressmaking being carried forward to today?

1.4 ORGANISATION OF THE RESEARCH

The research is introduced in Chapter One with an overview of the occupation of dressmaking in New Zealand. The aim and time scale of the study are recorded, as are the research questions to be addressed. The main focus of the study is concerned with dressmakers who worked primarily from their homes from the 1940s to the
1980s. The researcher’s personal interest in the practice of dressmaking is also documented.

Chapter Two establishes the contextual background and outlines the methodology of the study. The results of a search of the literature are evaluated, revealing a comparative lack of published material about the lives of New Zealand women during the selected period. The importance of the popular press is acknowledged, including recognition of the value of long-term publications such as the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly*. Texts that have provided relevant information on the lives and work of New Zealand women in general, and dressmakers in particular, are considered in relation to timeframes covering the nineteenth century, pre World War Two, and post World War Two. Texts that provide an international comparison are also noted.

The practice of collecting primary resource material through interviews and the recording of oral histories is discussed, and the interview questions are included. Finally, the processes of finding dressmakers to interview, and the identification of limitations to the research, are defined.

Chapter Three addresses the historical causes of the establishment of private dressmaking businesses in New Zealand. A comparison is provided between dressmaking practice in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Australia and, to a limited extent, the United States of America, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It considers the popularity of dressmaking as a source of employment for women, and their motivations for entering the profession. Historical factors unique to New
Zealand are discussed. Image One (p.16) shows a group of dressmakers at a picnic near Wellington, New Zealand in the late nineteenth century.

Chapter Four establishes a history of sewing in New Zealand, looking at how the first settlers organised their wardrobes in the nineteenth century. The growth of the demand for dressmakers and the manner in which they worked is documented.

Chapter Five is concerned with establishing a twentieth century context, leading up to or including the period of time when the interviewed dressmakers were working. Primary information drawn from the interviews with the dressmakers is an important inclusion in this chapter. Particular attention is paid to competition that dressmakers might have faced from retail and mail order clothing suppliers, and the manufacturing industry in existence at the time. The resources that were available to dressmakers, in the form of equipment and supplies, education and training, and assistance with business development, are also studied.

The opportunities and constraints imposed by the advent of World War Two, and its effect on women in New Zealand, are examined in Chapter Six. This period is particularly important because it is the starting point for the main focus of the study, and nearly all of the interviewed dressmakers were working by this time. Primary confirmation of the effects of the war on the lives and work of New Zealand women is taken from the interviewed dressmakers’ recollections of this period. Wartime employment of women and the impact of the war on the production of clothing are addressed. Comparisons are drawn with the effect of the war on the production of clothing in Britain and Australia.
Chapter Seven focuses on the primary source of information obtained from practitioners of the period. It analyses the responses to the questionnaire administered to the selected dressmakers. It looks at their family backgrounds; their reasons for becoming dressmakers and how they achieved this; the type and volume of garments that they made; and whether this production contributed to the growth of fashion and design in New Zealand. The information gained from the interviews is evaluated to determine its relevance to answering the research questions. As the major focus of the study, the chapter is divided into four subsections that address the background and skills acquisition experiences of the dressmakers; their professional experiences; their involvement in fashion-related activities; and the value of the content of the interviews.

In Chapter Eight, the post-war status of New Zealand fashion, up to and including the 1980s, is studied. This period represents the end point of the main focus of the study. Significant designers, dressmakers, manufacturers, and design competitions of the period are identified.

Conclusions drawn from the study are documented in Chapter Nine. The project is evaluated with reference back to the research questions and to the chapter summaries. Suggestions are made for opportunities for further research.

NOTES
i This letter was written by Marianne Williams, to her family in England. Her Letters and Journals, from 1825 to 1830, are held in the Auckland War Memorial Museum Library.
ii The Spicer Collection was originally donated to the Old Colonists’ Museum in Auckland, by descendents of Mary Ann Preece. When the Old Colonists’ Museum was closed in the 1950s, the Collection was dispersed between three locations. The Auckland War Memorial Museum was the recipient of the four dresses of Mary Ann Preece, and still holds those items.
iii Census records including dressmakers exist from 1874 and at every five years on average after that.
iv Malthus cites as her sources, newspaper advertisements, including the Nelson Examiner and the Otago Witness, the Wellington Almanack, Statistics of New Zealand for 1867, New Zealand Census
Veblen argued that the performance of conspicuous leisure and consumption was expected of women in order to demonstrate how ably their “masters” could financially support these endeavours. He contends that conspicuous waste and conspicuous leisure were reputable because they demonstrated pecuniary strength, and that was reputable because it suggested success and superior power. However, because the gentleman did not want to suffer incapacity or discomfort in this demonstration, it fell to his wife or female dependents “to afford evidence of a life of leisure, (or) even to disable themselves for useful activity” (Veblen, 1899, p.181).

Made-to-measure garments are created to fit a client’s personal measurements and usually require at least one, and possibly more, personal fittings.

This phrase introduced the pattern service in each issue that offered the free pattern. It is interesting in its tone, suggesting lofty aims and ideals perhaps beyond the practice of just providing a free pattern.

Image One: A dressmakers’ picnic at Days Bay, Wellington, circa 1890s (New Zealand Memories, April/May 2003, p. cover).
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE AND METHOD

In placing before the public a book treating of dress in a scientific manner, I may be allowed to remark that people are apt to look upon the subject in a wholly frivolous way. For my present purpose I will divide mankind into two classes, the people who think and the people who do not think. Now the people who think, the intellectual part of the population, look upon dress as something beneath and quite unworthy their attention; the people who do not think regard it wholly as a means of display (Ballin, 1885, p.1).

This chapter documents and examines the literature that includes references to women’s work, particularly the work of dressmakers, in New Zealand, covering the period from early in the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. It also examines texts that document the practice of dressmaking in the international arena, to provide a comparison to the New Zealand context. The chapter also addresses the methodologies employed to locate and record information.

2.1 CONTEXT

It is not the purpose of this dissertation to become embroiled, or indeed to defend a stance, on the debate over the right or otherwise of the study of “fashion” and clothing history to be recognised and respected as an area worthy of academic attention. While a number of serious writers have approached the study of apparel from an academic standpoint for over three decades now, there is still a sense, in the introduction to some contemporary texts, of the need to justify the study. Gratifyingly, the importance attached to placing and investigating “fashion” or apparel within the relevant social context appears to be growing. Many universities are now offering study within this field at undergraduate and postgraduate level. In New Zealand, Otago University has offered papers such as Dress and Society and Social Aspects of Clothing and Textiles, in its Department of Clothing and Textile Science, for several years. The University of Auckland’s Women’s Studies Department introduced a Level Three paper entitled Fashion, Identity and Globalisation in 2002. The country’s six
undergraduate fashion degrees all offer fashion theory papers to varying extents, plus the opportunity to continue study at postgraduate level.

Several forums now exist for the presentation of academic writing in the fashion, costume and textile disciplines. The quarterly *Fashion Theory, Journal Of Dress, Body And Culture*, edited by Valerie Steele, commenced publication in 1997 and presents a variety of work from theorists and researchers in each edition. The annual journals of the Costume Society of Great Britain (*Costume*) and the Costume Society of America (*Dress*) publish refereed articles.

The *Making An Appearance; Fashion, Dress And Consumption* conference, hosted by the University of Queensland in July 2003, was a major acknowledgement of the importance attached to fashion studies. The conference offered one hundred and thirty-three papers over three days and featured international keynote speakers.ii

In New Zealand the Costume and Textile Section of the Auckland Museum Institute was formed in March 2002 with the following objectives:

1.1 To promote interest in all aspects of historical and contemporary costume and textiles.
1.2 To foster the study of, and research into, New Zealand and international costume and textiles.
1.3 To encourage the conservation of costume and textiles in New Zealand.
1.4 To foster the spirit of mutual helpfulness among the Section’s members (The Costume and Textile Section, 2002).

The group organises an annual symposium and a series of seminars throughout the year.

Exhibitions with a fashion and culture focus have achieved large audiences from the academic community and the wider public in New Zealand in recent years; for example *Worth To Dior* and *Couture To Chaos* in 1995 and 1997 respectively, and *Diana’s Dresses* and *Versace* in 2000 and 2001 respectively.iii Locally mounted exhibitions such as *Next To Nothing - A
History of Lingerie, and Fashion On Wheels, The New Zealand Gown Of The Year are just two examples of the growing interest in presenting artefacts that reflect New Zealand’s fashion history and culture. The catalogues produced to accompany such exhibitions provide an enduring and accessible record of the artefacts and the research. Image Two (p.59) provides an example of promotional material for an exhibition at the Auckland War Memorial Museum in 2003.

The current position in New Zealand reflects, and lags only marginally behind, the international interest in fashion and culture. It is no longer difficult to locate any number of exhibitions and conferences internationally that address the history and cultural significance of fashion and textiles, and it is certain that the number of worthwhile publications in this field will continue to increase. As more and more people publish in this field, as a result of increased postgraduate and independent studies, researchers in fashion and textiles will start to feel less defensive about the subject. This should eventually do much to overcome any remaining misgivings from the wider academic community in regard to the study of dress. As Maynard said in the introduction to her study of the significance of clothing to Australia’s colonial history:

Clothing makes culturally visible the historical constraints and imperatives experienced by individuals and social groups. It serves as an arena for the public signalling of notions of morality and social stratification and can be a marker of sexual differences or ambiguities. Power relations, whether of class, race, age or sex, are constantly being negotiated through the practice of dress and its corollary, fashion (Maynard, 1994, p.2).

She was moved to comment that, “the absence of serious attention to dress (has) been especially marked,” and contended that, “the silences over the subject, linked as they are to the silences over women and their historical experiences, warrant further scrutiny” (Maynard, 1994, pp.3-4). Burman, introducing an anthology of writings examining the practice of dressmaking in Britain, said:

Some historians have regarded clothing as peripheral to historical enquiry, as too ephemeral or too everyday to warrant attention. Daniel Roche bluntly ascribed this to the ‘indifference of historians to the
real world of objects without high aesthetic value’. (Roche 1994: 502) Others have seen clothing largely in terms of fashion, requiring the chronicling of changes in style and form. This approach tends to overlook home dressmaking, although its role in the dissemination of designer styles has been noted. In recent years our understanding of clothing and fashion’s cultural, social and economic significance has deepened. More inclusive and integrated approaches to dress history are needed to contextualize it within wider studies of consumption and production. The ordinariness and domesticity of home dressmaking would seem to have contributed to its invisibility and the lack of analytical purchase on the part of historians in related fields’ (Burman, 1999, p.3).

Her motivation to publish a book that is “the first of its kind to explore the history of home dressmaking”, appears to have been drawn from her belief that:

home dressmaking over the last one hundred and fifty years presents us with a ‘subject’ no more or less readily defined than sex or cooking or childrearing or any other productive and consuming activity which took place in the same homes during the same period. Like the histories of sex and cooking and childrearing, the making of clothes at home has a history which enfolds a rich spectrum of cultural, social and economic practices (Burman, 1999, p.1).

Her justification has a resonance with this study’s intention to present a body of empirical historical research represented by the documentation of the practices and contributions of a group of New Zealand’s dressmakers.

2.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.2.1 The Study of Women’s History in New Zealand

Serious factual publications that have the achievements, experiences, and everyday lives of New Zealand women as their foci, were in the extreme minority before the 1980s. Many factors would have contributed to this regrettable lack of an impetus for women to write about themselves and other women, and to be published. Before the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s, adult women during the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s in New Zealand were primarily concerned with re-establishing domestic harmony following the end of World War Two and, in the subsequent decades, with keeping house, raising children, and pursuing voluntary work in the community. Employment was frequently an interim step before motherhood, and generally followed the traditional “feminine” careers such as hairdressing, working in a shop, clothing machinist and, perhaps teaching or nursing, for those who left school with the appropriate qualification. It was not the normal practice for women of this period to go to
university and possibly New Zealand universities lagged behind Europe and the United States of America in that, it was not until the 1980s that New Zealand universities began offering women’s studies as a legitimate field of study.

The editors of *Women in History 2* support this perception. To quote from the introduction to this text:

> Since 1986 women’s history has consolidated its standing as a valid and intellectually respectable area of academic inquiry. The *New Zealand Journal of History* recognised this by devoting its April 1989 issue to women and the past that women have experienced. As editor Raewyn Dalziel noted, the special issue acknowledged “that there is now an active group of researchers working in the area of the history of women and that they have important things to say.” Arts faculties in all universities now have developed courses on women’s history and it remains a popular area for post-graduate research. A number of the essays in this volume have their origin in post-graduate theses and research exercises (Brookes, Macdonald, Tennant, 1992, p.1).

They also note that:

> The first major book to issue from thesis research into New Zealand women’s history, Patricia Grimshaw’s *Women’s Suffrage in New Zealand*, was written (in 1972) but was reissued in 1987 – a recognition of the demand for work based on in-depth research (Brookes, etc, 1992, pp.5-6).

Most women who were living their adult lives during the 1940s to 1970s would have insisted that they had no story to tell; that the achievements of men or “famous” women were far more important. May (1992), said of the process of selecting women for her study, comparing the lives of women raising their children in the immediate post-war era to those following the same pursuit in the 1970s and 1980s:

> When first approached, most of the women (of the immediate post-war group) declared that their life was not interesting and that they knew somebody who had a more extraordinary life. It took some reassurance that their “ordinariness” was valuable and that I was interested in the “everyday” lives of women which had been excluded from the history books (May, 1992, p.10).

### 2.2.2 Historical Studies on New Zealand Women from the 1940s to the 1980s

Although several important texts have been published recently, notably by Ebbett, May, Montgomerie, and Taylor, the lack of historical studies on New Zealand women in the immediate post-war era would have been glaringly apparent to a researcher conducting a literature search prior to the 1980s. The search for wartime and post-war stories would have
revealed that the majority of texts were written by men, plus some texts written by or about women who generally served in the war in some capacity, and relatively few texts written by civilian women, certainly not before the 1980s.

*The Home Front*, published in 1986, is part of a series of studies, commissioned by the Historical Publications Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs, which records details of life in New Zealand during the period 1939 to 1945. While the study is not specifically about women, the fact that its focus is on life in New Zealand while so many of the country’s men were absent, means that much of the content is about women’s experiences. It is interesting to note that its publication date coincided with the burgeoning of the publication of women’s stories, particularly since it appears that other volumes in this *Official History* series were published much earlier, in the 1960s, and written by a woman (Taylor, 1986).

Most of the writers who recorded the wartime and post-war stories of New Zealand women expressed their concern that these stories should be documented before it became impossible to do so due to the advancing age of the subjects. They also believed that it was important that the lives and experiences of ordinary women and everyday life were included. Ebbett (1984) made this acknowledgement:

> There are many unsung heroes of World War II, not the least of whom are the New Zealand women who stayed at home while the men were away overseas. This book is an attempt to record their lives during those historic years. It is not a history of the services, although servicewomen who served both at home and abroad feature prominently. It is the story of all women in all situations – on the land, in the workplace and, above all, in the home (Ebbett, 1984, p.6).

May (1992) reinforced the importance of capturing this area of research:

> The changes within the community and the family that (the women) forged during the 1940s and 1950s were deemed to be secondary to the “citizenry” endeavours and breadwinning status of our fathers whose exploits in war and postwar reconstruction have been remembered and written about. Our mothers’ endeavours have “lived” only in the context that “they kept the home fires burning” (May, 1992, P.8).

Edmond’s motivation to write about women’s wartime experiences stemmed from hearing of the death in 1984 of the wife of a prominent military man:
Her own experience had been radically different from his, yet her life was equally changed by the trauma of the war years. The illuminating stories I knew she had to tell could not now be recorded, and it suddenly became obvious to me that many other stories from women still living who remembered one or both of the wars had not been told either, and would in time be lost. The struggles, the hardships, the tragedies and the strange pleasures of men’s wartime experience had, we knew, been extensively documented in books of history, fiction, sociology, and poetry. However, except for short histories of women’s wartime service organisations, very little had been written about the revolution in women’s lives (Edmond, 1986, foreword).

By the time Montgomerie published *The Women’s War* in 2001, she was able to apply hindsight and perspective to the lack of writing about the wartime experiences of civilian women, and men:

Shortages of paper and time constrained the production of books during the war. Since the conflict ended the contemporary accounts have been supplemented by an impressive number of memoirs, an effusion that peaked in the 1980s and 1990s as those who were in their 20s and 30s during the war reached retirement age. These scores of books confirmed that the war was a challenging period to live through and a subject of ongoing reflection. Most of the early first-hand accounts focused on military matters and this continues to be the case. Before the 1980s hardly any authors dealt with the experiences of civilians, male or female (Montgomerie, 2001, p.13).

2.2.3 The Importance of the Popular Press

The lack of published texts documenting women’s experiences in wartime and post-war New Zealand, particularly any material written during the period of this study, has led the researcher to investigate other sources of information. The continuous publication of several New Zealand magazines and newspapers throughout the time period has offered a body of work that provides a picture of issues of importance in women’s lives; the gender construct at home and at work, the relationship to the family and the community, the presentation of the feminine “ideal”, and the national and international figures that these publications considered to be of importance to women. Images Three and Four (pp. 60 – 61) show that the *New Zealand Graphic and Ladies Journal* featured (and lampooned) the latest fashions as early as 1891.

The *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly*, which commenced publication in 1932 and consistently achieved wide national circulation, presented a strong domestic focus. *Mirror*, published
from 1922 to 1963, was aimed at wealthier women and addressed the social behaviour and occasions of interest to this group. The *New Zealand Listener*, by way of contrast, provided a more intellectual presentation and analysis of New Zealand life. This publication, not aimed at either gender exclusively, commenced publication in 1939 and was widely circulated nationally. The *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* has historically been the most popular publication for women, achieving circulation figures of approximately one hundred and ninety-five thousand in 1967, and peaking at two hundred and fifty thousand in 1983. The *New Zealand Listener*’s circulation was approximately one hundred and thirty thousand in 1967; peaking at about three hundred and eighty thousand in 1982 (New Zealand Yearbook, 1990, p. 344). Both the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* and *The Listener* (formerly the *New Zealand Listener*, re-titled in 1973) are still in publication. In addition to the interviews with dressmakers, magazines and newspapers warranted inclusion as a source of primary information for the period of the research. Images Five and Six (pp. 62 – 63) feature covers from two popular women’s magazines.

As illustrated by May (1992), other researchers interested in women’s experiences in the immediate post-war years have met with the same problems when searching the literature. They have also concluded that magazines have been important in assisting to define the period, because of their significant circulation numbers nationally and their continuity of publication from the 1940s onwards. In the preface to *Minding Children, Managing Men*, May writes:

The decision to collect magazine material was partly dictated by the lack of historical studies on New Zealand women in the immediate postwar period, but I also wanted an alternative framework alongside which to position the life history material, not only to view the process of “accommodation and resistance” between individual women and collective media prescriptions of what women ought to do, but also as an indication of shifting expectations and values. For example the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* ran articles encouraging women to work for war and rehabilitation during the 1940s; to stay at home in the 1950s; to work part time in the 1960s and, by the 1970s and 1980s, to work full time in the name of equality. These shifts are part of a wider network of political, economic and social relationships which shape the opinions of the individual. Women’s magazines have become a particular focus for feminist
researchers of cultural studies in that they offer strong prescriptive messages about certain ideal constructions of femininity (May, 1992, p.11).

2.2.4 The Search for New Zealand Dressmakers

If there is a significant lack of published material relating to women’s experiences in the New Zealand of the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s, there is an absolute dearth of literature documenting their employment in general and the occupation of dressmakers in particular. In the introduction to *Women In History 2*, the editors write:

> Considerable coverage is given to aspects of women’s work, a relatively under-researched area of New Zealand women’s history (Brooke, Macdonald, Tennant, 1992, p.7).

In a slim collection however, they can only cover four or five areas of work in the twentieth century. *The Book Of New Zealand Women* (Macdonald, Penfold and Williams (Eds), 1991), documents the biographies of a wide selection of women. The *Index to Subjects* lists dressmakers under “Trades”, and the biographies of five dressmakers are included. Their stories provide an interesting insight into the background of the women but provide little material about their trade.

Malthus (1991, 1992, 1993) has recorded significant research on dressmaking in New Zealand in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but nobody appears to have picked up the thread, so to speak, following this period. Quéréé, Senior Curator of Canterbury History at Canterbury Museum, Christchurch, writes about dressmakers in Lyttelton, the port of Canterbury, in a brief article for *The Costume and Textile Section Newsletter* in Issue 3 March - June 2003. Her article speaks about the numbers of dressmakers and the nature of their businesses in nineteenth century Lyttelton. Olssen (1995) has referred to home and factory dressmakers, identified as part of his study of the relationship between the organisation of work in the skilled trades, politics and society in the Dunedin suburb of Caversham from the 1880s to the 1920s. The research by Malthus, Quéréé and Olssen
provides important contextual and historical background material, but the period in their focus precedes the timeframe of this research.

Occasionally newspapers and journals have yielded scraps of information about dressmaking, although much of it is more concerned with New Zealand “fashion designers” than with dressmakers. Angela Lassig, Assistant Curator – Applied Arts, at Te Papa Museum in Wellington, regularly writes a column on garments from New Zealand’s fashion history for *Memories* magazine. Nineteenth and early twentieth century pieces are included but there are generally few details available about the makers of the garments. Lassig is also conducting research into the work of Bruce Papas, a locally-renowned fashion designer from the 1950s to the 1980s, who specialised in expensive and elaborate garments. Papas’ title of “fashion designer” has led to the consideration of some interesting questions. Was there a period where the designations of “dressmaker” and “fashion designer” were interchangeable? Was there a distinction between the two roles or did they overlap? Was it, perhaps, not until the “youth culture” of the 1960s, and the presentation of fashion designers of that period as youth icons, that the titles of dressmaker and fashion designer became exclusive? As shall be demonstrated later, the dressmakers in this study frequently “designed”, to the extent that they created the garment styles, but they were heavily influenced by existing images or the available commercial patterns.

Designers and / or dressmakers have been the occasional subjects of newspaper and magazine articles. The Auckland War Memorial Museum Library archive contains a newspaper article (source unknown; probably the *Christchurch Press*, circa 1980s), about the retirement of Christchurch dressmaker and dressmaking teacher Rosina Pickering, after a forty-five year
career. The article records that she started her career by taking in sewing - “lots of bride’s gowns” - and that she taught her pupils cutting, drafting, sewing and designing.

Miss Pickering loves fashion. She keeps in touch by buying plenty of books and keeping an eye on the pattern books, though she can’t recall ever buying a paper pattern. All her clothes are designed and made by her (Source unknown).

So, here is an example of a practitioner, referred to as a dressmaker, who also designed and taught dressmaking and designing.\(^{\text{vii}}\)

Finally, during the 1960s, the *New Zealand Gown of the Year* fashion award show annually toured the North Island parading the beautiful ballgowns that had been entered into the competition. It has been described as featuring ballgowns from New Zealand’s top designers and dressmakers; as a display of masterpieces of the dressmakers’ craft; and as the platform for many young designers to launch their careers (*Apparel*, May 2000, p.14; *New Zealand Herald*, 5 September 2001, p.G2). No distinction was made as to whether each entry came from a designer or dressmaker and, according to some of the dressmakers interviewed, no distinction was apparent.

### 2.2.5 Pre-colonial / Colonial Period

Texts dedicated to descriptions of pre-colonial and colonial life are useful in determining the place of needlework in everyday life. They provide insight into the dress of the colonists, the dress of indigenous Maori, the adherence to the fashions of Britain and Europe, maintenance of the wardrobe, the difficulty of obtaining experienced domestic staff, and the relaxation of the rigid class structure of Britain.

A number of New Zealand publications refer to the existence and importance of dressmakers and allied trades in the shaping of nineteenth century New Zealand history, but few have the role and contribution of the dressmaker as their primary focus. Does the work that
dressmakers undertook in their own homes or in small business situations, during the period from the earliest European settlement and colonisation to the explosion of boutique fashion businesses in the 1970s and the deregulation of the clothing industry in the 1980s, have any significant place in the history of New Zealand fashion?

Barker (1870), Courage (1896), and Godley (1936), all provide vivid descriptions of life in New Zealand during the 1850s and 1860s. All three women led privileged lives as the wives of landholders in the Canterbury province and their publications are based on the journals that they kept and the letters that they sent to family and friends in England. They all lived in well-appointed houses, with domestic staff, and enjoyed a level of social standing that assured them of a wide range of social engagements requiring a fashionable and varied wardrobe. While they make no direct reference to dressmakers, they do discuss the fashions of the day and the extent to which they were followed in the new colony, the small concessions that were made to accommodate the climate and terrain, and the merits of various fabrics and styles of footwear. Their observations, drawn from everyday life, reveal a great deal about the physical and social development of the colony.

Drummond (1960) refers to the writings of Godley above, and to the letters and journals of other women immigrants, to describe daily life in the mission stations from 1814, and in the colonial communities as they were established from 1840. Drummond, A. & L.R. (1967) devote a chapter to clothing in their text *At Home In New Zealand*. They discuss the clothing of the missionary families, the emphasis placed on teaching and learning needlework skills, and the development of a very basic infrastructure to support the importation and manufacture of clothing for the growing colony. Both texts mention, to a greater or lesser extent, the lists of clothing that colonists were advised to take to New Zealand by G.B. Earp in his 1849
Handbook For Intending Emigrants To The Southern Settlements Of New Zealand, as does Ebbett (1977). Ebbett’s book is solely concerned with colonial fashion in New Zealand and covers the period from 1814 to approximately the end of the nineteenth century. She refers to Barker and Godley above, and also to Drummond and Woodhouse. Woodhouse (1940) published a collection of the stories of pioneer women; stories collected by the Women’s Institutes of New Zealand. Again, they paint a picture of daily life, with occasional references to dress.

Simpson (1997) has investigated the reasons for mass migration from Great Britain in the nineteenth century, and has identified the three stages of immigration into New Zealand. He discusses population growth, class structure, and the range of occupations represented. An insight into nineteenth century Britain is also provided by Wood (1982), with some discussion on the establishment of its colonies in New Zealand, America, and Australia. The Making Of A Colony, from 1815 to 1870, by Watters (2000), considers the colonisation of New Zealand with a particular emphasis on the impact on Maori. Phillips (1987) reflects on the nature of the New Zealand family from the period of colonial settlement in the nineteenth century to World War Two. His text is concerned with the pioneer man but, in his discussion about the lives of New Zealand men, it is necessary to review the lives of New Zealand women over the same period. The craft skills, held by the pioneers prior to emigration, are considered by Pearce, (1982). He refers to workers in the needle trades; tailors, seamstresses, dressmakers and milliners, and quotes the New Zealand Directory of 1866-67 for numerical listings of dressmakers/milliners in the main centres of population at that time.

Coney (1993) considers elements of nineteenth century fashion and apparel history, such as the restraint of the female body by the wearing of the corset, the influence of the Rational
Dress Association, the employment of women, the effect of industrialisation in the 1880s, and the establishment of the Tailoresses’ Union. A section on fashion refers to it as “The Tyrant Fashion” and discusses the complexity and symbolism of women’s dress. Reference is made to the status accorded to the client who could afford to have costumes made-to-measure by a dressmaker.

The most comprehensive studies of nineteenth century dressmakers, revealed by a literature search, are those written by Malthus, (1991, 1992 & 1993). She has acknowledged the difficulty in quantifying the number of women working as dressmakers in nineteenth century New Zealand but has, through investigation, made some evaluations about the popularity of this type of employment; the categorisation of the workers involved; the existence of an informal apprenticeship system; the methods of advertising the services offered; and the impact of industrialisation. She has referred to the *New Zealand Census* 1874 to 1901, and *Statistics of New Zealand* 1874 to 1900, for her statistical evidence, and taken additional information from newspapers and journals of the period.

### 2.2.6 Into the Twentieth Century – pre World War Two

Information about the daily activities of women’s lives in the first half of the twentieth century was chronicled to some extent by the newspapers of the time. The *New Zealand Herald*, for example, included a section for women from 1937 on, viii featuring articles of domestic interest and news on the latest in fashion. Magazines targeted specifically to female readership commenced publication during this period. *Mirror*, published from 1922 to 1963, was oriented towards “upper class”ix women, and presented its readers with information on the latest French fashions and advised on the correct dress for various occasions. The *New Zealand Home Journal*, published from 1934 to 1974, was designed for a more middle and
working class readership and included fashion, sewing, knitting, and other pursuits considered to be mainly feminine. Women had a choice of a wide range of magazines during this period. Some were published locally and others were imported but, in the main, they all concentrated on homemaking; baking, sewing, knitting and crochet. Titles included *Australian Women’s Weekly*, *The New Idea*, *Woman Today*, and *The Working Woman*. The *New Zealand Home Journal* achieved circulation of around seventy thousand during the 1960s and until its demise in 1974. The *Australian Women’s Weekly*, originally imported from Australia, started a New Zealand edition, published monthly, in the late 1980s. Its circulation at this time fluctuated between one hundred and twenty thousand copies and one hundred and forty thousand copies (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1990, p. 344).

Images that may have influenced the way women dressed were presented in local pictorial magazines such as the *Otago Witness* (published 1851 to 1932), and the *Weekly News* (originally the *Auckland Weekly News* and later *N.Z. Weekly News*, published from 1877 to 1971). Both magazines included photographs of royalty, society weddings, debutante balls, race days, and family or school reunions. The magazine that was probably to have the most impact on women’s lives was the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly*. As mentioned in Chapter One (1.1.2), this publication supported dressmaking by providing a free dress pattern service from 1939 to 1955, reintroduced in 1959 at a small cost.

Olsson, (in Bunkle and Hughes, 1980), discusses the role of women in work and the family from the 1880s to the 1920s. He considers the reasons behind the increasing participation of women in the workforce and the types of employment that they were involved in. Olsson (1995) devotes a chapter to ‘Skilled Women Workers’ and discusses the dominance of women in employment in the clothing industry in Dunedin at the end of the nineteenth
century and early in the twentieth century. He notes that women made up over eighty-five per cent of employees in textiles and clothing manufacturing (which included but wasn’t confined to clothing, dressmaking and millinery, shirt-making, and tailoring) in Dunedin in 1894; dropping to around forty-six per cent in 1906; and climbing back to over seventy-two per cent in 1915. Dressmaking and millinery businesses were well-represented in the clothing industry figures, with the average workshop employing just over six women (Olssen, 1995, p. 80). A selection of contributions by women writers has been compiled and edited by Else (1993) to record a history of women’s organisations, including the first women’s trade union, the Dunedin Tailoresses’ Union, established in 1889. Other organisations included are the New Zealand Rational Dress Association, (established in 1894), the Health and Beauty Movement (1937) and the Association of Home Science Alumnae of New Zealand (1921).

Malthus (1993) extends her study of women’s fashion in New Zealand to the investigation of freedom and restriction in women’s clothing from 1860 to 1990. The 1930s and the effect that the Great Depression had on women and their families is discussed by Ebbett (1981). She devotes a chapter to the difficulties of obtaining sufficient clothing during the Depression years and to how resourceful women were at recycling and making new garments out of old. She also includes a chapter on fashion and the extent to which it was followed. There is recognition of the dressmaking abilities that many women had, and utilised, to make clothes for themselves and their families during this period. The acquisition of dressmaking skills was highly encouraged and it was a subject taught in schools to female students. Technical colleges in the larger towns also offered classes in dressmaking. Sprecher (in Daley and Montgomerie, 1999) looks at the issue of “modernity” of women in the 1920s and how this related to their modes of dress in the workplace in the 1920s and 1930s, as an increasing number of young women in particular, entered the paid workforce during this period.
2.2.7  World War Two and Beyond

This period encompasses the major focus of this study. Essentially, the intention has been to evaluate and interpret the position of dressmakers in New Zealand’s history from a consideration of existing studies and from primary research material. Empirical historical evidence was likely to be identified from both sources but, the majority of primary research material for this period has been drawn from interviews with the dressmakers.

There is a considerable body of existing documentation relating to this period and, in particular, to World War Two. The texts seem to fall into three categories: those written by men (and largely excluding women’s experiences); those written by women who served in the armed forces or some related essential service; and those written by civilian women. Of the latter, there are relatively few, and they have generally been published from the 1980s onwards. Montgomerie (2001) says:

Civilians did not write because they did not feel that their experience was a central part of the drama of war. Women did not write because war was still defined as men’s business. Civilian women were least likely to believe their wartime experiences were worth recording. This began to change in the early 1980s, with the development of a self-conscious women’s history of the war…By the early 1980s the model of war history as the history of military heroism was losing its explanatory power. In the 1970s the feminist movement, combined with the development of social history, stimulated the growth of women’s history (Montgomerie, 2001, pp.13-15).

A number of accounts drawn from interviews with women, and edited volumes containing collections of shorter personal accounts of wartime experiences, were published during this period. Later studies include texts, a radio series encouraging listeners to record individual recollections of the war, and a film entitled War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us (Preston, 1995). The film, like most of the texts, focuses on wartime relationships, work, family, shortages of commodities, and the pattern of everyday life. None of the existing studies focus on clothing or clothing production exclusively, although many have some reference to the fashions of the day and to how these were acquired.
The Home Front Volume 11, (Taylor, 1986), is part of a series entitled The New Zealand People At War, the official history of New Zealand during World War Two. Taylor documents the direction of manpower, including women, into essential services and industries. Clothing manufacturing businesses were among the first to be classed as essential. Women who met the manpowering criteria were directed to work in clothing factories or, if already working in one, were held in that position and unable to leave for a different job. Commodities subjected to rationing are also documented, including details about clothing, hosiery, underwear, and knitting wool. The regulations relating to austerity clothing are listed, with mention of the resourcefulness of women in overcoming the constraints that they imposed.

Both home and professional dressmakers were making smart new clothes out of old ones, cutting up, turning, dyeing and joining new material to old. Home dressmaking classes, with special advice on using remnants, were popular (Taylor, 1986, p.841).

Ebbett (1984) writes of the effect of the war on the lives of New Zealand women, drawn from interviews with women and men who were living in New Zealand at this time. Ebbett looks at the effects of shortages and rationing of clothing and some of the ingenious solutions applied to overcoming them. Edmond (1986) has also compiled a series of women’s recollections of the effects of the war on their lives, with several referring to learning to sew, sewing as employment, and making new clothes from any fabric that was available, however unorthodox, or re-making old clothes. Nicholson (1998) has written a comprehensive history of knitting and spinning in New Zealand, but many references are made to clothing in general. The sections on the 1930s Depression and World War Two reinforce the impression that the vast majority of New Zealand women had the necessary skills to make or alter clothing. Artefacts of dress from the 1940s and 50s are considered by McKergow, (in Dalley and Labrum, 2000). She refers to the importance of physical artefacts and considers examples of wartime and post-war clothing in New Zealand.
Montgomerie, (in Daley and Montgomerie, 1999), considers the impact of World War Two on family life and on gender relations, particularly in regard to employment. Employment, specifically the industrial conscription of women, is also the focus of Montgomerie in Brookes, Macdonald and Tennant (1992). Brief mention is made of clothing factories as essential industries. Montgomerie expands on this in The Women’s War (2001). She debates the notion of whether employment opportunities for women, created by the demands of the war, had any significant effect on reorganising the gender balance in the workforce in peacetime. She contends that, despite the wartime innovations that saw women working in traditional male occupations such as drivers, tram conductors, and herd-testers:

…most women continued to be employed in occupations conventionally regarded as female (Montgomerie, 2001, p.22).

The New Zealand war effort was geared to the production of food and clothing, not armaments. The main effect of the war was to redistribute women workers within female-dominated areas of employment (Montgomerie, 2001, p.29).

She considers the post-war expectation that women would surrender their employment aspirations and return to the roles of mother and homemaker, as does Coney (1993), under the heading, Housewife or Human Being?

May (1992) has compared the life experiences of a group of New Zealand women who were rearing their children in the immediate post-war years and a similar-sized group who were rearing their children during the 1970s and 1980s. The study is useful for its comparisons of the economic, historical, political, and ideological context within which each group of women lived. A study of post-war New Zealand life (King, 1988) summarises the essence of each decade from the 1940s to the end of the 1970s, and provides a sociological, political and domestic context for each period.
Phillips (in Daley and Montgomerie, 1999) reflects on the gender separation of leisure activities in post-war 1950s New Zealand and poses questions about whether men and women are still involved in separate leisure pursuits. He includes data from the 1970s that records that sewing was still an important leisure activity for women at that time. He also discusses the effect that women’s increased participation in the workforce, from the 1950s to the 1990s, had on their involvement in leisure pursuits.

*Kiwi Baby Boomers* are the subject of McGill’s (1989) book with that title. The text is comprised of statements from members of the baby boomer generation that reflect their experiences of 1950s and 1960s life. There are several sections that include statements about clothing and fashion that provide, often amusing, insights into the nature of New Zealand fashion during this period:

> Mother made all my clothes – pure polished cottons, organdy party dresses, boleros of fluffy white stuff or pastel pink and lemon with puffed sleeves, Peter Pan collar jerkins and milkmaid blouses (McGill, 1989, p.14).

Judson (1999) has drawn together data about the number of people working in the clothing and textile industries in 1950s New Zealand, and the proportions of locally produced clothing in comparison to imported clothing. In her study of the Mollie Rodie MacKenzie collection of 1950s garments held by Canterbury Museum, she makes some observations and evaluations of the services provided by dressmakers during this period.

In order to ascertain the competition that dressmakers faced from the opportunity to buy ready-made fashion, a brief study of retailing in New Zealand has been made, with particular reference to the establishment and growth of the major department stores. In nineteenth century New Zealand, these businesses frequently sold imported ready-to-wear fashions, fabrics, and haberdashery, but also maintained dressmaking departments, catering to private
clients, on their premises. Several of these stores remained in business for decades; a small number of them are still trading.

Millen (2000), in Kirkcaldie and Stains, documents the history of this Wellington department store from its establishment in 1863. Auckland department store Milne and Choyce established its dressmaking department in 1875. This is recorded in Tucker (1968) in a publication of the store’s one hundred year history, from 1867 to 1967. Caughey (1980) records the history of Smith and Caughey Ltd, from 1880 to 1980. This iconic Auckland department store is still trading. The story of the Farmers department store, now a large organisation with stores in many New Zealand towns, is slightly different. This organisation began as a mail order business in Auckland in 1909, and its progression to the establishment of a department store and garment manufacturing workrooms is recorded in Kay (1953).

Christchurch Street, (Smith, 1998), presents a brief history of the first stores in the city of Christchurch, including a corset-maker, and drapers and clothiers, J. Ballantyne and Company, a department store that remains in the hands of the same family today. Further insights into the Ballantynes of the 1930s and 40s are provided by Eldred-Grigg in his book about the 1947 fire that destroyed most of the shop, including its dressmaking, tailoring and millinery departments. xiii

References to the retail sale of apparel in New Zealand from the 1940s onwards are recorded in Wolfe (2001). He also briefly records the introduction and growth of clothing boutiques in the 1960s and the history of a few of New Zealand’s most enduring clothing manufacturers. He mentions dressmaking, as part of a chapter entitled Dropping Stitches: The Dearth Of Homecraft, but presents it as a purely domestic pastime, in the same category as hand
knitting, rather than as an occupation. His record of apparel retailing includes the growth of suburban shopping malls and bargain clothing stores from the early 1980s.

*Old Money* (2000), a documentary produced by Television New Zealand, provided an insight into the establishment of several of the dynastic family businesses that grew out of the needs of the increased population generated by the discovery of gold in the South Island in the 1860s. The documentary included the Hallenstein family (clothing manufacturers and retailers since 1863), Sargood, Son and Ewen (importers of goods, including apparel, since 1862), and the Hannah family (footwear manufacturers and retailers since 1874).

Written information about the resources available to dressmakers is scarce; much of the relevant information in this area has been drawn from primary sources, the interviews with the dressmakers. However, some magazines of the period offered patterns and carried advertisements for dressmaking and patternmaking courses. The experiences of the interviewed dressmakers suggest that, as professional dressmakers, many of them adapted purchased patterns or were capable of making their own. About half of the group attended additional skills courses, such as patternmaking. Wolfe (2001), Ebbett (1981), and Else (1993) refer to the education curriculum in New Zealand schools during the early to mid-twentieth century, the period covering the school years of the interviewed dressmakers. Their information has relevance in recording that sewing was part of every New Zealand schoolgirl’s education until the 1960s.

Data about the importation of textiles in the 1940s and 50s can be found in Judson (1999). The importation of textiles and haberdashery in earlier decades is referred to in Caughey (1980), Kay (1953), Millen (2000), and Tucker (1968). References to warehouses that
received imported goods and sold to local retailers can be found in *Old Money* (Television New Zealand, 2000) and Wolfe (2001). Newspapers of the nineteenth century frequently carried advertisements for shipments of goods that the warehouses had received, often mentioning the ships that had transported the goods (*Gisborne Herald*, 30 December 1899, p.2). A search of the literature has not revealed any information that was available during the period of the study to assist and advise women how to set up a business.

However, from personal evaluations, the most useful information regarding the competition facing dressmakers, and the attainment of their resources and expertise, can be obtained from primary sources: advertisements placed in the newspapers and magazines of each era and in each region, and from the responses of the dressmakers interviewed. The sources listed have been useful in indicating primary records to be further investigated and evaluated with reference to this research.

### 2.2.8 International Comparisons

A search for literature that would provide an international comparison to the experience of New Zealand dressmakers, specifically in the 1940s to 1980s timeframe, yielded little of relevance. However, one text, *The Culture of Sewing*, (1999), edited by Burman, contains several valuable entries. These include a study of home dressmaking in Edwardian England and the relationship between dressmaking and women’s magazines in Britain from 1919 to 1939. It also includes an evaluation of the motivation for changes in home dressmaking in the U.S.A. during the twentieth century; a study of the importance of home dressmaking to the Jamaican community both at home and in the United Kingdom from the 1940s to the 1960s; a history of the commercial dress pattern industry; and a record of the British Government’s
promotion of home sewing during World War Two. All have relevance in providing a comparison to New Zealand practices of the same periods.

Gamber (1997 and 1998) uses her studies of American women in the millinery and dressmaking trades in the nineteenth century, to argue that a gender bias existed in the recording of the history of American small businesses, resulting in the lack of acknowledgement that businesses owned and operated by women even existed. A similar situation appears to have existed in Australia in regard to the achievements of Ann Hordern and Eleanor Lucas. Their stories are referred to in greater depth in Chapter Three (3.1). Gamber includes valuable information on the practices of nineteenth century American dressmakers. A history of tailoring and dressmaking, and the impact of the increasing availability of ready-made clothing, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in France, is presented by Perrot (1994).

Ballin (1885), in her capacity as a lecturer to the National Health Society in England, had some interesting (and, through twenty-first century eyes, faintly ludicrous) beliefs about the contribution of dress to the preservation of good health. Her guidelines for dress reform included instructions for dealing with dressmakers:

> It wants both knowledge and firmness on the part of the mother to get a dress properly made; for the maker, as a rule, has a powerful store of arguments by which she defends her errors, and the genus dressmaker is too apt to keep the genus lady in a state of hopeless and miserable subjection (Ballin, 1885, p.190).

The 1990 publication of *Sew To Success! How To Make Money In A Home-Based Sewing Business* (Spike, 1990), apparently in its seventeenth reprint by 1997, could be an indication that there are still women who want to work as dressmakers and that there is still a market for dressmaker-made garments. It speaks mostly to an American readership but would have considerable relevance to the New Zealand context.
Pollon (1989) and Reekie (1993) provide an Australian comparison; Pollon through her history of Sydney retailers and warehouses, and Reekie in her text on nineteenth and early twentieth century consumerism and the strategies employed by department stores to attract the female consumer. Dressmaking departments were an important attraction of these stores and dressmaking was a common area of employment for Australian women. Maynard (1994) addresses the issues surrounding the acquisition of clothing appropriate to the needs of the colonisers of Australia in the nineteenth century, and refers to dressmaking practice in this context.

International fashion and women’s magazines, many of which have been available in New Zealand over the period of this study, while not directly about dressmaking, frequently included articles and information of use to dressmakers. Responses from dressmakers interviewed indicate that some of them referred to publications such as *Vogue*, *L’Officiel*, and *Vanity Fair*.

### 2.2.9 Conclusion

The motivation for starting this study was a belief that stories about the life and work of New Zealand dressmakers had not and were not being recorded. Who were these dressmakers? What contribution could their stories make to the documentation of New Zealand’s apparel history? A search of the literature confirmed the initial impression. Several publications mention dressmakers and dressmaking briefly, but none have made this occupation their major focus. The most significant contributors, who have documented parts of the story, are Malthus (1991, 1992, 1993), with her study of nineteenth and early twentieth century dressmakers; Ebbett’s (1977) study of colonial fashion; Nicholson’s (1998) history of knitting...
in New Zealand; and the 2001 publication by Wolfe, entitled *The Clothes That New Zealanders Have Loved*, that covers the period from the end of World War Two to the year 2000. There is undeniably a place for a comprehensive study of the experience and experiences of New Zealand dressmakers, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century, and it is the objective of this investigation to pursue that goal.

2.3 METHODOLOGY

The researcher’s background includes the achievement of a fashion and textiles qualification at a New Zealand polytechnic in the 1970s, several years of employment in the apparel industry and in costuming for television productions, followed by several years of teaching practical subjects in a New Zealand polytechnic. The advent of fashion and textiles degree qualifications in New Zealand, and the achievement of university status by the polytechnic, led the writer to the pursuit of research and the award of a Masters degree in 1995. Consequently, the researcher’s approach is drawn not from the experience of a historian or a sociologist for example, but from the experience of a practitioner in the fashion industry and an educator in practice and theory in this field.

Therefore, the identification and selection of a suitable methodology for this study was not bound by expected or usual practice in the fields of history or the social sciences; areas in which the study might have been expected to sit. The researcher believes that, with the growth in the number of fashion degrees in both local and international colleges, practitioners and educators in the field of fashion are in a position to establish research traditions of their own. This might or might not include appropriating or adapting aspects of the methods traditionally used by other disciplines. When considering a suitable methodology, the researcher was encouraged by Ian Griffith’s contention that:
Fashion has become a suitable subject for academic treatment, but, it seems, only when viewed from the safe distance of the sociologically related fields or when dressed in garments borrowed from more exalted intellectual and artistic fields. The voices of practitioners, or indeed the practice of fashion do not figure large in its academy, and consequently a whole world of information is hidden from view … The field which is commonly designated as the academy of fashion is the intersection of the various disciplines which have an interest in the subject. Yet it still has to establish its own identity; understanding of fashion per se is usually indicated to those studies which have examined it (Griffiths, 2000, pp.89-90).

Ultimately, narrative inquiry, a methodology used by many sociologists and historians, was selected as a logical methodology to employ for this study, primarily for its empathy to the documentation of lived experiences. Susan Chase’s discussion about narrative inquiry appeared to confirm and support this decision:

Contemporary narrative inquiry can be characterised as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods – all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them (Chase in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.651).

The narrative can be oral or written; drawn from fieldwork, interviews, or naturally occurring conversation. The narrative can be concerned with a particular event or specific character, an extended story about aspects of life such as education, employment and family, or the story of an entire life. The story can revolve around one person or a group of people; the central questions are generally related to the experiences of the specific person, or group of people, who has lived through them. Chase says:

And although all qualitative researchers address the question of the relationship between the relatively small “sample” they study and some larger whole, this question is particularly important for narrative researchers, who often present the narratives of a very small number of individuals – or even of just one individual – in their published works (Chase in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.652).

The narrative can be referred to as a life history, a life story, a personal narrative, or an oral history. Chase suggests that the terms are used interchangeably by some researchers and usually assume slightly different meanings for sociologists and historians (Chase in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.652). Whatever the terminology, the premise is that the subjects or interviewees have stories to tell and these stories “constitute the empirical material that interviewers need if they are to understand how people create meanings out of events in their
One of the principal aims of this study was to construct a narrative around the practice of dressmaking, as lived and experienced by a group of women in New Zealand during the period from the 1940s to the 1980s.

2.3.1 Sources of the Research

2.3.1.1 Primary Research

Throughout the process of investigation, it was apparent that the dressmakers themselves provided the most valuable primary resources. Interviews and conversations with this group of women would uncover information about their lives and work in the context of 1940s to 1980s New Zealand, and this information would underpin the development of the narrative. As a research method, narrative inquiry and the collection of oral histories presented an opportunity to record lived histories and experience lived connections between the generations.

A search of the literature has revealed that information such as that offered by the dressmakers who participated in this study, is not available elsewhere. However, other primary sources were consulted to establish historical and social context, to identify resources available to the dressmakers during the period of their practice, and to study physical examples of the work of dressmakers during the period. These sources included newspapers and women’s magazines of the period, census records, legal statutes, ephemera from the collections of the dressmakers, original pattern drafting texts, personal communications,
personal memories of the researcher, and original garments and artefacts in exhibitions and museum collections.

2.3.1.2 Secondary Research

Secondary sources have been referred to primarily to establish historical background and social context, to define the environment that preceded and surrounded the lives and work of the dressmakers from the 1940s to the 1980s. Texts provided significant information, but newspapers, magazines, journals, trade publications, electronic websites, exhibition catalogues, film and video, and a number of unpublished theses were also consulted.

2.3.2 The Collection and Analysis of Oral (Life) History Narratives

Oral history collection, or the collection of the spoken stories and experiences of a person or group of people, is an effective method of uncovering information that is to be found in memory rather than in documents. “Oral history refers not only to the process of gathering data, but also to the result of that process” (Hutching, 1993, p.1). In this study, the oral histories of the dressmakers frame the construction of the narrative. Hutching also says that oral history can be defined (although not the only definition) as “the printed version of the material that has been recorded on tape, whether a verbatim transcript or one that has been edited for publication” (Hutching, 1993, p.1).

In academic practice, it grew in value from its initial use as a method of giving a “voice” to traditionally neglected or dismissed groups or subjects such as women’s groups, ethnic minorities, and gay and lesbian groups. The success of oral history collection lies in accessing the stories of “ordinary” people and, as such, presented itself as an appropriate
method to apply to the documentation of the dressmakers’ stories and contributions. Lomas says:

Anybody working in the field of fashion or film, knowingly or unknowingly, relies very heavily on undocumented sources. After a period during which the voices of “ordinary people” were rejected by professional / academic researchers, the importance of oral history has begun to be acknowledged in the humanities and it is now being recognised as a valuable research tool for accessing first-hand experience. Researchers in the field of dress and textiles have realised its value and over the last ten years have used oral testimony to great effect (Lomas in Bruzzi & Church Gibson, 2000, p.363).

This is further supported by Hutchings contention that:

Material uncovered in an oral history interview is valuable because it could have come from no source other than your informant. It thus allows an historian to study groups and individuals whose activities have not previously been documented (Hutchings, 1993, p.59).

Hutchings (1993, p.2) suggests that there are two main types of oral history interview: “life history interviews, and interviews recorded to acquire information about a specific subject; that is, topic-based interviews.” The intent of the interviews conducted with the dressmakers was to elicit information in both areas.

The interviewer has to recognise the balance of power that exists between interviewer and interviewee, and ensure that appropriate attention is paid to the planning of the interviews and to negotiation and agreement about how the material collected is to be used. Oral history applied to social research has tended to focus on powerless groups; therefore the interviewer assumes control. The National Oral History Association of New Zealand has defined the responsibilities of the interviewer in its Code of Ethical and Technical Practice. Every attempt was made by the interviewer to adhere to those guidelines.

It was of great importance to this study that the dressmakers interviewed were aware that the researcher felt it was a privilege to record their stories. The interview session frequently began by putting the research in context and speaking about the researcher’s own experiences as the child of a dressmaker, and as a sewer herself, thereby establishing an environment of a
conversation between one practitioner and another. The hope was that this would convey to the dressmakers a personal understanding of, and a great respect for, their work. As oral historian Mary Stuart says:

…the interview process is an intimate one. We are all aware as oral historians that we are sharing personal experiences. This process cannot be one way (Stuart quoted by Lomas in Bruzzi & Church Gibson, 2000, p.364).

Fontana and Frey suggest that:

Increasingly, qualitative researchers are realizing that interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but rather active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results. Thus, the focus of interviews is moving to encompass the *hows* of people’s lives (the constructive work involved in producing order in everyday life) as well as the traditional *whats* (the activities of everyday life) (Fontana & Frey in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.698).

During investigations, it was interesting, and reassuring, to find that Burman (1999) had used this approach in her study of home dressmaking in the United Kingdom in 1995. She says, of a conference on the theme of “Home Dressmaking Reassessed”, held in 1996 at the Winchester School of Art, England, that, “home dressmaking was chosen because it was a particularly commonplace activity yet largely neglected in academic research” (Burman, 1999, p.2). She had preceded the conference with an oral history project in which she recorded the sewing life histories of eighteen women.

These stories, spanning the last eighty years, revealed many starting points for further enquiry, notably the variety of ways in which sewing skills were acquired including considerable ambivalence towards the school curriculum and teaching methods, the opportunities identified for expression of individual creativity, the variety of motivations and influences at play in the practice, the perceived relationship between homesewn and ready-made garments and changes in the retailing of home dressmakers’ supplies and aids. These life stories reinforced a picture of home dressmaking as an important nexus in the wider social and economic patterns of production and consumption of clothing. From these stories the conference grew and then the book (Burman, 1999, p.2).

Burman apparently selected the oral history method because she maintained that it could capture certain nuances and unexpected additional information that other methods, primarily written, might overlook. It not only gave her access to information in answer to specific questions, such as the age of the interviewee when she learned to sew, and where the sewing
machine was kept, but also to unsolicited information that was revealed about the
participants’ lives and experiences as their stories unfolded. Lomas sums up the validity of
the method well:

In conclusion, oral testimony provides an insight into personal lives and, as Paul Thompson (1978)
suggests, it does “illuminate ordinary experience”, particularly that which is highly descriptive and full of
anecdotal material but which is so often ignored by the history books of dress and textiles – those that
document the successful fashion designers and shops, and chart the changing silhouettes and length of
hemlines, but leave the all-important consumer out of the picture. By accessing the voice of “ordinary”
people, the interviewer can “engage” with history, question sources first-hand before those valuable
sources are lost, whilst also raising many issues pertaining to the value of both the spoken and written
word (Lomas in Bruzzi & Church Gibson, 2000, p.368).

2.3.3  Recording Oral History Narratives in New Zealand Studies

There are several examples of the use of the oral history method of information gathering in
the written accounts of New Zealand women’s lives and work, again generally dating from
the mid 1980s. Ebbett (1984) used contemporary sources and oral interviews as the basis for
describing wartime life in When The Boys Were Away. May (1992) spent two years selecting
and interviewing women for her cross-generational study of raising children. She speaks
about the related experiences of the women constituting her primary data, and contends that:

The collection and analysis of life history narratives is an established, albeit fringe form in
anthropological and sociological research, but the increasing popularity of the life history analysis is part
of a movement to recapture and understand the context of the individual and the personal in social history
(May, 1992, p.9).

Oral history narratives have also featured on radio and film in New Zealand. The Spectrum
series produced by Radio New Zealand offered a selection of oral histories about wartime
film War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us (1995) is a feature-length film that presents
New Zealand women speaking about the effects of World War Two on their lives and
relationships.
In the introduction to *Women In History 2*, the editors spoke of books about women having featured prominently in New Zealand publications lists in the five years preceding 1992, and went on to say:

However, those with an historical orientation have a relatively narrow range of approaches. Oral histories and biography have featured prominently, and fall into two main categories: biographical collections based on the lives of women who are dead, and largely autobiographical collections based on interviews with, or reflective essays by, living individuals (Brooke, Macdonald, Tennant (Eds), 1992, p.2).

### 2.3.4 Locating and Selecting the Dressmakers

Eighteen dressmakers were interviewed as part of this research project. Seven of the dressmakers were found by referral and eleven were located in response to an advertisement; fifteen of the eighteen dressmakers were interviewed in person and three responded by mail and telephone. Attempts to locate retired (and possibly still practising) dressmakers began very early in the research, because of a motivation to begin the process of gathering this information. It was necessary for the dressmakers to have been actively involved in dressmaking from the early 1940s to the early 1980s, therefore the group was identified by this criterion rather than by date of birth. Dressmakers from as early in the twentieth century as possible could be included, but an awareness existed that ill health and failing memories, as this group aged, might preclude this. It was a pleasant surprise to find that six of the dressmakers interviewed were practising before 1940.

The obvious starting point would have been with the researcher’s own mother, but an idle conversation with a young laboratory technician while having a blood test, elicited the information that her grandmother, now in her eighties, had worked as a dressmaker. Contact was made, the dressmaker was delighted that anyone was interested in her story, and the interview took place. The interview with the researcher’s mother was the second one conducted.
The first experience of finding a dressmaker by chance, reinforced the value of telling people about the research focus. Many of the women found by referral lived in the Auckland area; unsurprisingly, since that is where the researcher lives and the location where the research was generally promoted. It was necessary to widen the access to include women from other cities and from rural areas. However, it was not considered crucial to have a spread of respondents proportional to the spread of population in the country. The selected group of interviewees may not have been absolutely typical of all dressmakers practising in New Zealand during the period, but the commonalities that became apparent from their responses suggest that many elements of experience were universal.

The national distribution of the group was widened by advertising for participants. The *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* includes a column called “Noticeboard”, that allows readers to submit a notice that they want to have published. The *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* has a wide national circulation and appeals to an older readership so it seemed to be an appropriate location for an advertisement. A letter was written to the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* on 29 September 1999 but it was not until 12 June 2000 that the notice was published. In the meantime, the editor of the column made contact with information that her mother-in-law fitted the criterion, and this dressmaker was later interviewed. The text of the notice was:

> I would like to contact **dressmakers who worked in New Zealand between the years 1945 to 1975**, preferably from home or from their own business premises. Their knowledge, experiences, and reminiscences will be very beneficial in assisting me in my Ph.D study. Please contact…

The response was immediate and this advertisement or notice elicited fourteen possibilities of whom eleven were eventually interviewed. Selection of who to interview followed no defined method. All the women who responded were suitable subjects. Generally, respondents were finally excluded only because of the difficulties and expense of travelling to their locations. Ultimately, it transpired that fifteen of the eighteen interviewees had lived and
worked in centres other than Auckland, (the largest centre of population and where the researcher is based).

2.3.5 The Interview Questions

The interview questions were formulated very early in the research and eventually developed into a list of fifty questions. The list was considered for quite some time: questions being added and removed, and then rewritten to be accessible to the dressmakers, and to hopefully draw out narrative responses to them. The language and terminology used in the writing of the questions was considered to determine whether it was respondent friendly. Initially, the intention was to treat the first two or three interviews as a pilot trial, to determine the suitability of the questions in eliciting responses. When the first two interviews proved to be successful, with only minor adjustments required, a decision was made that the pilot trial was no longer necessary and interviewing progressed using the same format.

The questions could be grouped logically into underlying themes; providing information on personal background, equipment and facilities, development of technical expertise, attracting clients, specialisation, influences on design, textiles and haberdashery, business acumen and operation, competition, allied activities, and archives. The questions and groupings are as follows:

**Personal Background**

1. Were you born in New Zealand?
2. If not, where were you born?
3. What year did you come to New Zealand?
4. How old were you then?
5. Was there a family tradition of dressmaking?
6. Why did you choose to work at home?

7. Which year did you start dressmaking and when did you give it up?

8. Why did you stop?

9. What city or town were you based in?

10. Were you married?

11. What was your husband’s attitude to your work?

12. Did you have any children?

Equipment and Facilities

13. Did you have an area of the house set aside solely for your dressmaking activities?

14. What equipment did you have and where did you get it from?

15. Did you use a dressmakers’ model or tailors’ dummy?

Development of Technical Expertise

16. How did you develop your expertise?

17. Did you do any patternmaking, construction or textiles courses?

18. Did you use commercial purchased patterns or make your own?

Attracting Clients

19. Why, in your opinion, did your clients come to you?

20. How did you get your first clients?

21. Did you ever advertise?

22. What was the age group of your clients?

23. What was their socio-economic status, in your opinion?

Specialisation

24. What type of garments did you predominantly make?

25. Did you make for occasions such as weddings, debutante balls, balls, etc?

26. Were you known for specialising in any area?
Influences On Design

27. How were designs decided upon?
28. Were your clients fashion-conscious?
29. Were they influenced at all by the well-known European designers, such as Dior?
30. Were you ever asked to make a direct copy of a designer original?
31. Did you subscribe to or stock any fashion magazines?

Textiles and Haberdashery

32. What textiles did you predominantly use?
33. From where did you source those textiles?
34. From where did you source your haberdashery?

Business Acumen and Operation

35. How did you charge - hourly rate or per garment?
36. Did you have any difficulties in receiving payment?
37. Did your clients regard your business as a professional business?
38. Did you get any professional advice on setting up a business?
39. Did you operate your business as a registered business, i.e. pay tax on earnings?
40. Were your earnings essential to the household income?
41. How many hours per day, on average, did you devote to dressmaking?

Competition

42. Did you have any competition in your area from other dressmakers?
43. What opportunities were there in your city or town for clients to buy retail?
44. In your opinion, why didn’t they?
45. Are you aware of any mail order catalogues or mail order opportunities that were available at the time that you were in business?

Allied Activities
46. Did you offer other services, such as dressing, accessorising, millinery, or shopping with the client?

47. Did you ever enter any dressmaking or design competitions?

48. Were you ever involved in the teaching of dressmaking?

49. If so, over what period of time and to whom?

Archives

50. Do you have any examples of your work, such as photographs or actual garments?

Considerable empathy can be felt with Lomas (2000) when she speaks of interviewing a group of British men about their clothing choices:

The formats for the interviews I conducted were not rigidly structured, and allowed the interviewee to elaborate on any points they wished (Lomas in Bruzzi & Church Gibson (Eds), 2000, p.367).

Bell (1993) recommends:

Freedom to allow the respondent to talk about what is of central significance to him or her rather than to the interviewer is clearly important, but some loose structure to ensure all topics which are considered crucial to the study are covered does eliminate some of the problems of entirely unstructured interviews. …Certain questions are asked, but respondents are given freedom to talk about the topic and give their views in their own time. The interviewer needs to have the skill to ask questions and, if necessary, to probe at the right time, but if the interviewee moves freely from one topic to another, the conversation can flow without interruption (Bell, 1993, p.94).

The interviews for this research did follow the order and structure of the questions devised but, occasionally, a dressmaker’s lengthy response would answer subsequent questions and it was necessary to adapt the sequence of the questions to suit. If an interviewee had departed from the topic, she would be guided back to it with a leading question or comment. In many instances, the interviewee was simply allowed to elaborate on her story to the extent that she desired.

As with Lomas, “the findings of the research were qualitative rather than quantitative” (Lomas in Bruzzi & Church Gibson, 2000, p.367), seeking insight rather than statistical
analysis. According to Bell (1993, p.6), “Researchers adopting a qualitative perspective are more concerned to understand individual’s perceptions of the world.” The interview questions used for this research were designed to draw out insights about the lives and occupations of dressmakers: their practices and production during a defined period of New Zealand’s history.

2.4 LIMITATIONS

There is potential for the method of employing oral history narratives to present some limitations. Bell (1993) says:

There are problems of course. Interviews are time-consuming, and so in a 100-hour project you will be able to interview only a relatively small number of people. It is a highly subjective technique and therefore there is always the danger of bias. Analysing responses can present problems, and wording the questions is almost as demanding for interviews as it is for questionnaires (Bell, 1993, p.91).

The timeframe for conducting the interviews was not restrictive, therefore it was possible to interview a number of women initially, and continue to conduct interviews while other aspects of the study were also progressing, for example, consideration of the available literature. A decision was made to interview only female dressmakers because it is the intention of this study to record women’s history in this occupation (see Abstract). There is a justification for not including men, given that a dressmaker is defined as “a person, usually a woman…” (see Chapter One; 1.1). However, although the focus of the investigation is to document the experiences of women, occasionally information regarding male dressmakers has been included to provide comparison and contrast.

The interviews were structured to the extent that all the dressmakers were asked the same questions, but unstructured to the extent that they could elaborate on any points to extend the personal narrative. Bell’s advice that:

Conversations about a topic may be interesting and may produce useful insights into a problem, but it has to be remembered that an interview is more than just an interesting conversation. You need certain
information and methods have to be devised to obtain that information if at all possible (Bell, 1993, p.94),

was kept in mind.

The decision was made to record the interviews, rather than take notes, to ensure that all the information was captured and to eliminate the risk of misquoting or misrepresenting the dressmakers’ viewpoints. All the interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed by the researcher, with the awareness that other interviewers may not have the same understanding of the objectives of the project and may inject a different bias. As Bell says:

Where a team of interviewers is employed, serious bias may show up in data analysis, but if one researcher conducts a set of interviews, the bias may be consistent and therefore go unnoticed (Bell, 1993, p.95).

Of course, a particular personal bias may have been applied, as the daughter of a dressmaker, and having personal skills and experience in that field. On reflection, it was not felt that this background, or carrying out the research as a solitary interviewer, inflicted a negative bias. It was necessary to ensure that all the questions were answered and therefore a “prompt” was inserted only to lead an interviewee back to the questions if required. When introducing the research to the interviewees, the hope was that the researcher’s background and knowledge would have a positive effect and make the dressmakers feel more comfortable. There was an awareness that most of the women were elderly and that a personal rapport had to be established before requesting the opportunity to enter their homes, place a tape recorder in front of them, and take up some of their time. The dressmakers were also assured that their identities would not be revealed in the documentation of the research. It was discussed with the dressmakers that they would probably be quoted in the work, and their agreement was gained for this practice to occur. The decision to identify the women by abbreviations rather than their full names was taken to ensure that no barriers would exist to constrain the flow of information. In fact, it was obvious that the interviewees, while taking the interviews
seriously, also enjoyed the social nature of the exchange and the opportunity to reminisce on past experiences.

There was also potential for old memories to be evoked, some of them sad or distressing to the interviewee. This did occur to a limited extent but, handled with tact and empathy, did not cause any problems. There were some tears and a lot of laughter. The assumption that the interviewer’s age, maturity, and life experiences might help to put the interviewees at ease in these circumstances proved, on reflection, to be accurate.

Some limitations were expected on the quality of the information, given the age of some of the dressmakers. There was potential for inability to tie information accurately to dates, for contemporary knowledge and experience to influence the responses, and for selective memory to apply, if a dressmaker wanted to present only a particular aspect of her experiences. Steps were taken to overcome this by interviewing an appropriate cross-section of the group; related to the number of interviewees, their ages and locations.

Ultimately the location of some of the dressmakers did prove to be a limitation. Travelling all over New Zealand to interview all respondents would prove to be too time-consuming and expensive, but there were opportunities to conduct several interviews out of Auckland and a balance was achieved. Fourteen of the total group of participants worked primarily in the North Island in cities, smaller centres, and rural areas; four of the participants worked in the South Island. Three of the dressmakers responded by mail, but all three were subsequently spoken to by telephone, and a meeting was arranged with one of the three when the opportunity was presented by an unexpected visit to the town where she lived.
Once the methodologies for acquiring information had been identified and were put into practice, conclusions could be drawn about the environment that allowed dressmaking to grow as an occupation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This environment, particularly in New Zealand, and comparatively in Great Britain, Australia and the United States of America, is documented in Chapter Three.

NOTES

i Ash and Wilson; Bruzzi; Hollander; and Steele, to name a few.
ii The speakers were Elizabeth Wilson (University of North London), Valerie Steele (The Museum, Fashion Institute of Technology, New York), and Christopher Breward (London College of Fashion).
iii Worth to Dior and Couture to Chaos were both mounted by the National Gallery of Victoria and presented in New Zealand at the Auckland City Art Gallery. Versace and Diana’s Dresses were presented by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.
iv Next to Nothing - A History of Lingerie was presented by Auckland Museum in 1997. Fashion On Wheels, the New Zealand Gown of the Year was mounted by Hawke’s Bay Museum in 2003.
v Burman cites the works of Beward (1995); Brewer and Porter (1993); Craik (1994); Lipovetsky (1994); Perrot (1994); Roche (1994); Styles (1994); Wilson (1985); and Fine and Leopold 1993.
vi Ebbett (1984), Montgomerie (1992 and 2001), and Taylor (1986) record the manner in which World War Two affected the lives of New Zealand women. May (1992) compares the lives of 1970s New Zealand women with the lives of their mothers’ generation.

v Other designers and/or dressmakers who, for example, have been the occasional subjects of newspaper and magazine articles are Flora McKenzie (New Zealand Herald, 8 October 1985, p. unknown); Annie Bonza (New Zealand Woman’s Weekly, 12 June 1989, p.27); Vinka Lucas (New Zealand Woman’s Weekly, 25 August 1980, p. unknown); and Angele Delanghe (Mirror, No.12 Vol.XXVIII June 1949, p.27).

viii As did The New Zealand Weekly News and the Wellington Evening Post, all frequently written by Mollie Rodie McKenzie under various names; see Chapter Eight (8.1).

ix While the delineation of the social classes was not as pronounced as in Britain, for example, there was a section of society in New Zealand that included women who had the time, financial means and social opportunities to suggest the existence of an “Upper Class”.

x The decrease in numbers in employment in textiles and clothing manufacturing was due to interest in the new opportunities in clerical and secretarial jobs. Young women tended to stay at school longer to get the necessary commercial skills (Olssen, 1995, p. 76).

xi Seddon Memorial Technical College, opened in 1895 (and now AUT University where the researcher is employed) was renowned for its teaching of dressmaking.

xii Miller, Tucker, Caughhey, and Kay all based their studies on primary source documentation, with access to company records and archives. Smith’s text has been produced as an information booklet offered by Canterbury Museum and is compiled from primary and secondary sources. Eldred-Grigg conducted interviews with survivors of the Ballantynes’ fire.

Image Two: An example of a promotional flyer for a fashion exhibition.
Image Three: The New Zealand Graphic and Ladies Journal featured the latest fashions for its readers. This issue from 1891 includes a tea gown of heliotrope silk and bengaline on the left, and a black silk dress with gold silk border on the right (New Zealand Graphic, 5 December 1891, p.665).
Image Four: The New Zealand Graphic lampoons a woman’s visit to her dressmaker (New Zealand Graphic, 5 December 1891, p.668).

**CROWDED OUT.**

**ETHEL:** ‘I like this dress very much. It is just too delightfully tight. But where are the pockets?’

**Dressmaker** (handing her two small silken bags): ‘Here they are. You’ll have to carry them in your hands. There’s not room in the dress for them.’
Image Five: The 4 July 1935 cover of the New Zealand Woman’s Weekly, a popular magazine that commenced Publication in 1932, and is still in publication.
Image Six: The cover of another popular women’s magazine available in New Zealand, the Australian Home Journal, 1 March 1958, edition. Patterns were enclosed for the dresses illustrated on the cover.
CHAPTER THREE

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

By the early 1850s the steerage immigrants in New Zealand had made two important discoveries. The first was that in a new land there was significantly less social constraint on what they might achieve by way of a comfortable living than there had been in Britain, particularly if they had a skill which was in short supply. But they had also been made aware that success in attaining such a level, or even striving to do so, was not necessarily welcome to those who might have been expected to enjoy a considerable social distance over them if they had remained at home and who resented the disappearance of such distinctions (Simpson, 1997, p.97).

Chapter Three documents the process and rationale behind emigration to New Zealand in the nineteenth century. It continues with a comparison of dressmaking in the nineteenth and twentieth century contexts, including colonial settlement and the contribution of missionary wives, and discusses the elements that made New Zealand uniquely different to other locations.

3.1 NINETEENTH CENTURY

Several texts have been valuable in providing background and comparable developments in the nineteenth century, in particular Simpson (1977) and Wood (1982) for information on the conditions and circumstances that motivated many emigrants to leave Great Britain. Pollon (1989), Reekie (1993) and Maynard (1994) provide perspectives on colonial settlement, retail trade, and dressmaking activities in nineteenth century Australia. Gamber (1997 and 1998) is invaluable for discourse on the practice of dressmaking in the United States of America, with an emphasis on the city of Boston.

Simpson’s focus is on patterns of nineteenth century emigration from Britain to New Zealand specifically. He reports that just over four million emigrants are recorded as having left the British Isles between 1853 and 1876, although the real number may have been double this (Simpson, 1997, p.7). Obviously implications can be drawn from both sides of the equation; New Zealand experienced a large growth in population in a relatively short time,
and people appeared to be leaving the British Isles in large numbers for various reasons, including changes in employment opportunities in urban and rural areas.

Technological advances were being applied at this time to many industries, particularly the textile industry; a staple export industry in Britain for the previous three to four centuries. Machinery began to replace the labour of craftsmen in the workplace. For example weaving, a craft formerly executed on hand looms in cottage industries, had become a process carried out almost entirely by machines in factories by 1830. The unemployed rural population was augmented by an increasing number of unemployed urban dwellers (Simpson, 1997, pp.26-27). Many of the employed faced sharp decreases in income due to increasing competition for employment caused by the surplus of available labour. Life, for many working class families, was wretched; low wages, if employed at all; long hours of work; minimal, poor quality food; and overcrowded, sub-standard housing.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 demanded that families who had been receiving relief payments from their local parish, as a supplement to their meagre wages, would be required to work for the parish. Under the 1834 Act, workhouses were set up in each parish, “where the level of life would be so low that only the genuinely destitute would allow themselves to become a burden on the parish rate” (Wood, 1982, p.89). At first the number of people in the workhouses was quite low, but an economic depression in 1837 made thousands unemployed and the number of “paupers” sent to the workhouses increased greatly. All paupers over the age of seven were expected to do the same kind of work; married couples were separated and parents were not permitted to see their children. In one respect, the law succeeded in keeping a number of people off relief payments since no-one wanted to enter a workhouse if they could avoid it. The notion that it would make workers more diligent and therefore more
productive to employers, and lead to the offer of better wages, was totally unfounded however. In fact, with employers able to use the threat of the workhouse as an excuse to not raise wages, in many cases wages went down. Wood sums up the effect of the Act:

Thus the years following the Poor Law Amendment brought no immediate end to the destitution and starvation in the countryside, which was only relieved in the course of time by mounting prosperity in the 1850s (Wood, 1982, pp.90-91).

Public protests by the labourers, and an increase in the crime rate, were perceived as a threat by members of the middle classes by the 1830s. The more perceptive among them recognised that the widespread unrest was a response to the considerable social distress that the poor were suffering. According to Wood (1982, p.61), “the fear of revolution remained predominant in the minds of the established classes in Great Britain.” Many believed that emigration could be a solution to the problems of over-population and various schemes were devised to assist and encourage people to emigrate to North America, South Africa, Australia and, subsequently, New Zealand. Simpson (1997, p.155) notes that:

These depressed social groups were not generally those from whom emigrants, particularly to the antipodes, were drawn. But the knowledge of the widespread existence of such groups contributed significantly to the social fear of falling into the underclass, and motivated much emigration to colonies and territories where, it was believed, this was much less likely to happen. The developing lower middle class was particularly prone to such anxieties.

Emigration posters presented images that contrasted the dire living conditions and starving figures of England with the happy well-fed families in the colonies. Simpson presents examples of posters portraying the circumstances of the needlewoman at home and abroad, and the comparative possibility of a better life for families in New Zealand (see Images Seven and Eight, pp.86 - 87). Before 1850, Britain had established new settlements in Australia and South Africa; annexed New Zealand; revised the government of Canada; founded Singapore and Hong Kong; and extended territorial control in India and Burma (Myanmar). In general, politicians appeared to regard the idea of colonies as potential markets, and as useful destinations for surplus population and investment of capital. Planned emigration and the
eventual development of self-government in the new colonies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand were championed in government by a small energetic group of colonial reformers who proposed and instigated various settlement schemes (Wood, 1982, pp.215-217).

From the mid-1850s, New Zealand grew rapidly, particularly in two areas; the number of people, and the number of sheep that it sustained. The settlement companies’ proposal to develop the colony as a community of small arable farms was hindered by the lack of and suitability of the land to this purpose. The land was infinitely more suited to large-scale pastoral farming. During the 1860s and 1870s, New Zealand was to achieve considerable prosperity based on the export earnings of its agricultural products. Simpson refers to the 1861 *Official Handbook of New Zealand* for details on the breakdown of the workforce:

As with most nineteenth-century colonies, the occupational mix of the workforce was a relatively simple one, with agricultural and pastoral workers, skilled trade workers and non-agricultural labourers each accounting for about a quarter of the workforce, and those engaged in the professions, trade and commerce, and domestic service the rest. It was also a predominately young population, in which about two-thirds were recorded as being the wives and children of those who were working. This too was typical of new colonies. Perhaps, less to be expected, nearly seven out of ten could read and write in 1861 (Simpson, 1997 p.115).

The planned settlements in New Zealand selected immigrants to obtain a balance of “settlers of the superior sort” and “labouring immigrants” (Simpson, 1997, p.66). The settlement companies proposed to price land in the new colony just beyond the reach of most labourers to ensure that they had to work for labourers’ wages for two to three years before they could buy their own land. The companies’ attempts to engineer the structure of New Zealand society weren’t entirely successful. Firstly, the nature of New Zealand’s large-scale farms led to too few “employers” amongst the colonists to provide work for all the prospective “employees”. Secondly, while the settlement companies sent approximately twelve thousand people to New Zealand, almost as many again arrived as a result of direct immigration,
generally from Australia. These immigrants ranged from land speculators to those intent on establishing small businesses, such as drapers and warehousemen.

Records of letters written to England during the 1850s, all made comments to the effect that people with a skill or trade did not remain in agricultural employment or domestic service when they saw that their skills and trades were in demand and that they could earn a greater income by practising their trades. These were people who had originally been enticed or attracted to New Zealand to meet the need for agricultural workers or domestic servants, and who could no longer find employment in their trades in Britain (See Image Nine: p.88). Did this circumstance apply to dressmakers too? It seems very likely, given the example of Lyttelton, the port of Christchurch and landing point for the area’s colonists from 1850.

Quérée (2003, p.4) reports that the first drapery and haberdashery business opened in Lyttelton in 1851, followed by the first millinery and dressmaking business in the same year and, between then and the turn of the century, forty-six millinery and dressmaking businesses served this small community. Quérée records that most were owned or operated by married women. It appears that colonists arrived, assessed demand and established organisations to meet that demand, within the constraints of their financial capabilities. This is exemplified in the clothing field by the establishment of warehouses, small owner/operator dressmaking and tailoring businesses, itinerant pedlars on horseback, drapers’ shops, department stores, and clothing manufacturing businesses - all before the end of the nineteenth century.

Australia, as New Zealand’s closest neighbour, experienced a process of colonisation by Britain that was to be echoed in many respects in New Zealand, although there were significant differences in Australia. Initially, Australia’s main attraction for Britain was as a site for the development of a penal colony, an enterprise that started in 1787. 

68
First forays into trading were apparently initiated by the officers of the military garrison, particularly in the sale of rum. Attempts to stamp out this practice by successive colonial governors were unsuccessful, and independent traders were quick to take advantage of opportunities to set up businesses.

The complete lack of shops meant that the early colonists, especially the wives of officials, had to depend on relatives and friends in England to send out articles they needed. Even buttons or a yard of ribbon were requested and awaited as treasures, by the ladies (Pollon, 1989, p.2).

Three former convicts were among the first successful retailers in the new colony.

Improvements to the first settlement of Sydney; the recognition of the suitability of the land to sheep farming, and the possibility of trading opportunities, led to the arrival of increasing numbers of free immigrants in the early decades of the nineteenth century, often encouraged by the promise of assisted passage and free land grants. Also, these settlers had the same reasons as the first colonists to New Zealand, for leaving Great Britain. The number of settlements grew, predominately in coastal locations, with settlements in Victoria and Southern Australia.

Amongst the free settlers were two names that were to become synonymous with Australian retailing, Anthony and Ann Hordern in 1823 and David Jones in 1834. The start of what was to become a vast family retailing business, Anthony Hordern and Sons, began in 1825 with the establishment of Ann Hordern’s small shop that sold bonnets and stays. By 1901, the business had expanded to occupy a store that covered an entire city block, with a total floor area of nearly twenty acres; an area that included a large clothing factory manufacturing for the store (Pollon, 1989, p.3; Reekie, 1993, p.xix). Drapery businesses started by women were not common but Ann Hordern and Eleanor Lucas, a Ballarat widow, both played an important role in the history of apparel manufacturing and retailing in Australia. Lucas and her three daughters began making shirts, underwear and nightdresses in their home in 1888. The
business, by now E. Lucas and Company Pty Ltd, expanded into increasingly larger premises to the extent that, by 1907, the factory covered an area of eleven thousand square feet and employed two hundred and twenty people. It was a significant employer of Ballarat residents and, at various stages in its existence, the company produced women’s blouses, dresses and lingerie, and children’s wear and sportswear. It maintained a fabric knitting mill and dyehouse, and pioneered a number of textile manufacturing techniques in Australia.\textsuperscript{vii}

During the 1850s and 60s, the six separate colonies in Australia thrived. The discovery of gold in New South Wales in 1851 led to a sharp increase in population, as news of sensational finds in the goldfields were published in overseas newspapers (Wood, 1982, pp.349-350). This influx of population inevitably had an effect on consumption.\textsuperscript{viii}

Maynard confirms that the growing Australian colonies generated an insatiable requirement for clothing. She notes that:

\begin{quote}
The colonies depended heavily on imported clothing … especially British goods … Local manufacturers responded to the aggressive flow of imports, mainly from British sources, by establishing businesses that combined retailing of imported goods with local garment production. The resulting relationship between clothing stores, local traders and dressmakers, and British agents, reveals that the Australian market had its own specialised requirements (Maynard, 1994, p.117).
\end{quote}

She relates that imported items were often cheap, varied and attractive and, in contrast, locally made clothing was more practical but more limited and expensive. Maynard acknowledges the significance of home dressmakers to the establishment of local apparel production in Australia, and refers to them as “hidden workers”.

\begin{quote}
Although scarcely acknowledged by historians, a vast private economy of home dressmaking and tailoring provided a further dimension of the Australian market. Its extent reveals the important place of locally crafted garments in colonial dressing. More significantly, it points to the likely effect that home dressmaking had on retarding expansion in the market for readymade women’s clothing until the end of the century.

The role of all classes of colonial women in the manufacture and maintenance of clothing and footwear was significant, although the numbers of tradeswomen actually employed are likely to have been underenumerated by census data. Thus any attempt to gain a clear picture of the ‘invisible’ spheres of female occupational groups, including needlemen, dressmakers and milliners, is frustrated by the likely distortion of the official figures (Maynard, 1994, p.126).
\end{quote}
According to Pollon, in the retail sector, some family retailers sent representatives to London to buy stock to suit the Australian environment in meeting the demands of the new influx of British migrants, and to encourage the earlier colonists into the stores.

By this time (circa 1855-60) Sydney shoppers were doing their buying in style, in stores which from humble beginnings had developed into something akin to their London counterparts. Goods from overseas mingled with those made in Australia, and some storekeepers employed footmen to open their doors to customers (Pollon, 1989, p.6).

Stores in New Zealand established a similar practice, and many of the dressmaking goods imported into New Zealand came via Australian ports. For example, in the 1860s a regular monthly steamer service transported goods and people between Wellington and Sydney (Millen, 2000, p.15). Reekie (1993, p.7) asserts that, as the second half of the nineteenth century progressed, visiting the shops, particularly the large-scale city emporiums and drapery businesses, became a form of recreation and entertainment for women. It was legitimised through the expectation that women would organise the household and be responsible for managing domestic affairs including shopping for clothes and items for the home. A visit to one of the large city drapery houses, such as David Jones or Anthony Horderns, was designed to make the customer feel special.

Arriving at the main entrance of her preferred drapery establishment, the female shopper would alight from her carriage to be greeted by a shopwalker, formally dressed in morning suit, who would courteously ask her which departments she would like to visit (Reekie, 1993, p.8).

Reekie (1993, p.11) also contends that:

As efficient millinery and dressmaking departments were crucial to the success and reputation of the high-class drapery business, dressmakers, milliners and tailors were key personnel in the nineteenth-century emporium, commanding relatively high salaries and status.

She reports that dressmakers in particular, were in considerable demand as employees in the drapery stores in late nineteenth century Australia, and were therefore able to take some control over the negotiation of their terms of employment. Dressmakers, milliners, and
tailors, and their workers were engaged in the manufacture of “exclusive and personally fitting garments of special design.”

Despite the use of standard patterns, fashion plates and fabric types, each woman could order a new spring hat or a ball gown, confident in the knowledge that her model was personalised. The wealthy woman’s pleasure in the garments sold ‘upstairs’ in the drapery store were, however, achieved at the expense of the health and well-being of many hundreds of sewing women working away in less pleasant conditions ‘downstairs’ in the store’s workrooms. An estimated 1300 workers, 900 of them female, were employed in the tailoring workrooms of Sydney’s retail establishments in 1891 (Reekie, 1993, p.11).

Anthony Hordern’s obviously still retained its attractiveness as a retail destination fifty to sixty years later. MH, one of the interviewed dressmakers, spent three months in Sydney in 1948. In one of her letters to family in New Zealand, dated 18 October 1948, she wrote:

I bought Mrs Jacques’s wool on Thursday a pretty clover shade & a fleck. We just happened to see it when we were in Anthony Horderns. It is a huge shop and plenty of carpets and wall-to-wall … The frocks, evening frocks & materials are beautiful you wouldn’t believe it unless you could see them. We don’t see half the things at home we can buy over here. … Norah if you want any lystave or spun silk 5/9 spun linens 8/3 just send the money over & I will get them. There are also plenty of buttons boilproof, pearl & glass in all colours. Sequins 1/9 packets & little studds (sic) for clipping on dresses, in gold, birds, leaves, stars & other shapes. I bought a doz (sic) of birds & leaves 3/10 for two doz. They are very nice. … The moiré taffeta 42 ins wide is only 8/3 a yd & in the most gorgeous shades. I am thinking of getting some for a skirt ballerina length as they are all the go, with white silk or georgette blouses.

Some interesting parallels with the New Zealand and Australian experiences can be drawn from Gamber’s extensive study of nineteenth and early twentieth century dressmakers in the city of Boston, Massachusetts. Comparing the New Zealand colonisation experience with the United States in general, would be too broad an undertaking, however, it is relevant to use this one city as a comparative example. This is not to suggest that dressmaking practice in Boston was typical of every city in America. ix Boston’s population increased steadily during the nineteenth century; by 1840 it had reached nearly ninety-four thousand people, and nearly one hundred and eighty thousand by 1860 (“Boston History and Architecture,” n.d.).

Gamber reports that milliners and dressmakers accounted for two of the single largest categories of nineteenth century female entrepreneurs in the United States. She describes the female entrepreneurs as, “self-employed women who ran their own concerns, however
miniscule or ephemeral” (Gamber, 1998, p.189). She defines dressmakers, in the context of her study, as women “who designed and crafted individual garments for exacting customers” (Gamber, 1997, p.5). She says that her study relies heavily on Boston sources not because that city had any special significance for the history of fashion, but because a considerable portion of the nation’s dressmakers lived there, and because it was a city that, through various women’s organisations, had developed a “rarely surpassed documentation of the history of the city’s wage-earning women” (Gamber, 1997, p.8).

As with New Zealand and Australia, dressmaking in the United States was one of the most likely occupations for nineteenth century women. In 1870, only domestic servants, agricultural labourers, and seamstresses were more numerous. By 1900, dressmaking was the third most popular employment for women in the United States (Gamber, 1997, p.7). Also, by the nineteenth century, in common with New Zealand and Australia, dressmaking and millinery had become almost exclusively feminine occupations. In earlier centuries, tailors and milliners had outfitted both sexes.\(^x\)

Nineteenth century American women were no less involved in the endless task of clothing the family than their British and Australasian counterparts. They were encouraged to hire a dressmaker or to learn the skills of dressmaking themselves. It was suggested that, as American women of that era, they could find themselves in remote outposts of the new country and be forced to rely on their own skills.\(^{xi}\)

Wilson (1999) contends that, in the United States:

Women’s clothing remained in custom production throughout the end of the century, crafted by professional dressmakers and, after the introduction of new dressmaking technologies in the 1860s, by home sewers as well. Custom production established an interactive and highly localized social context for the production of women’s dress. The production and meaning of dress was embedded in the structures of women’s everyday social lives and clothing production was an important site of agency for
women as producers and consumers. In custom production, women had creative input into their dress design within the constraints of traditional dressmaking techniques and patterns; garments were the result of interactive negotiations between clients and professionals. Since the skills to cut and fit a new dress accurately were the preserve of the professional dressmaker, many women relied on dressmakers to make new or special dresses, reserving the construction of undergarments and other plain sewing for their own efforts. Because dressmaking practice was defined by a reliance on formulaic bodice, sleeve, and skirt patterns, modifications were inherent to the process as dressmakers catered to customers who made special requests for dress design elements and bought garments custom fitted to their bodies (Wilson in Burman, 1999, p.143).

The new dressmaking technologies of which she speaks, were the availability of the sewing machine, and the availability of proportional dress patterns. Wilson reports that, “patterns were available both through mail-order services and agents located in major metropolitan areas such as Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago and Cincinnati (Wilson in Burman, 1999, p.145). The United States was certainly not the location of the origin of the dress pattern; English and French publications had included pattern drafts since the 1770s, and full-scale, fold-out patterns appeared in French and English periodicals from the 1840s. However, “United States pattern manufacturers produced mass-market patterns for the retail and mail-order marketplace from the outset, thereby establishing the commercial pattern industry” (Emery in Burman, 1999, pp.236-237).

According to Gamber, young women entering the occupation of dressmaking were apprenticed to a “mistress craftswoman” for about three years. They served their apprenticeships unpaid and, in fact, they or their parents often had to pay a cash premium to be taken on as an apprentice.

Dressmakers….began their careers as apprentices, usually assigned such menial tasks as sewing long, straight seams and running errands. Accomplished modistes became finishers, mistresses of fine needlework, then fitters (sometimes called cutters), workers who cut garment pieces from the cloth. Once they had mastered their trades, successful workingwomen often embarked on businesses on their own (Gamber, 1997, p.59).

As Gamber points out, dressmakers would not have been able to set up their own businesses if they had not been suitably qualified and experienced. It appears that in Boston the best dressmakers “presided over elegant establishments” in the most fashionable streets
downtown; the cheaper shops could be found in the city’s north end; and “second-rate
dressmakers, more likely than milliners to work at home, were dispersed throughout the city”
(Gamber, 1997, p.31). There is insufficient comparable information to conclude whether the
same circumstance is true of New Zealand dressmakers. The impression gained in New
Zealand is that operating from premises was not necessarily solely the preserve of the elite
and working from home did not necessarily suggest that a dressmaker was second-rate.

It appears that Boston dressmakers, and milliners, believed that they were socially superior to
women who sewed in factories. Their rationale for assuming this superiority was that:

they did not labor in factories, they worked with “fine things,” and (since most shops drew little
distinction between “workers” and “saleswomen”), they interacted with “ladies” of the middle and upper
classes (Gamber, 1997, p.73).

Boston dressmaking establishments embraced the labour-saving attributes of sewing
machines fairly rapidly; no establishments used them in 1860 but, by 1870, ninety-five per
cent used machines. However, fashion garments still required skill in individualised cutting
and a great deal of handwork in stitching bodices and finishing garments. The ownership of a
sewing machine in the home led to increasing numbers of women attempting to make their
own clothes. The advent of paper patterns, and the introduction of hundreds of systems for
drafting patterns in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, did more to challenge the
dressmakers’ monopoly, by allowing the home dressmaker to emulate the skill of personal
cutting (Gamber, 1997, pp.137-138). The limited accessible information on New Zealand
dressmakers of this period does not suggest that the availability of sewing machines and
pattern systems had such a significant impact on their livelihoods. The impression gained is
that machines were slower in their adoption in New Zealand (possibly because every machine
had to be imported from Britain or the United States), and there is little evidence of a range of
pattern drafting systems being available in New Zealand at this time.
In comparison, in the United States, it seems that the new dressmaking technologies may have had a significant impact on the livelihoods of professional dressmakers although, as Gamber concedes, there is no hard evidence of this:

The persistence of age-old practices and the not inconsiderable deficiencies of modern devices suggest that, by 1900, scientific methods had won an incomplete victory at best. We have no means of learning how much business dressmakers lost to newly emboldened home sewers; despite the availability of sewing machines, paper patterns, and drafting systems, the number of professionals continued to increase. Some dressmakers clung to traditional methods; others embraced “scientific principles”; still others incorporated new techniques into long-standing practices. Some continued to learn their trades from Madame; others - with the help of patterns and systems - taught themselves. No doubt the ratio of one to the other will remain a mystery. One thing is certain: craftswomen who could not cut without the aid of patterns and systems, and who perhaps could not sew without the aid of machines, were far more prevalent in 1900 than in 1860 (Gamber, 1997, p.154).

3.2 TWENTIETH CENTURY

In Britain, the production of ready-made clothing grew in the nineteenth century from the production of uniforms, shirts and working clothes, to include cheap work suits for men, but ready-made clothes for women were still relatively rare by the early twentieth century and were often regarded as poorly made and ill-fitting (Burman, 1999, p.39). Britain entered the twentieth century experiencing “immense and obvious divergences in standards of living” and “innumerable common situations in which Edwardians were made to feel their precise station in life” (Thompson, quoted in Burman, 1999, p.35). Huge numbers of working and middle class women were employed in domestic service and in factories, particularly in the clothing and textile factories or as paid outworkers who sewed at home for factories or workshops. The Edwardian era also saw significant growth in the number of women, young unmarried women in particular, into “white collar” employment in offices, shops and teaching positions. Burman (1999, p.38) notes that:

It is an important characteristic of clothing in this period that individuals within a wide diversity of class and income used private dressmakers for making, recycling or renovating garments. Dressmakers were common as local sole traders in their own homes as well as those who sought more exclusivity by renting rooms in shopping streets and they offered a vast range of quality and price; there was one to suit every pocket.
Burman suggests that home dressmaking not only for clients but also for the sewer or her family’s consumption was supported by the desire of women to conform to the dress codes expected of the period and of the workplace, and of some dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of ready-made clothing. Aspirations to be “fashionable” were formed and fed by the spectacular displays in the retail shops and by the publication of a number of fashion magazines. Home dressmakers were also recognised as a market for the purchase of paper patterns.

Patterns existed for outerwear, underwear and nightwear, for morning, afternoon and evening frocks, skirts and blouses as separates for many occasions, clothes for sports and holidays, for children, adolescents and grown women. Unlike the home dressmakers of a generation or two before, their Edwardian counterparts could make clothes as stylishly as they wished from patterns designed to provide up-to-the-minute fashions promoted with clear seasonal differentiation and frequently with full directions for making up (Burman, 1999, p.46).

In Britain, although paper patterns were available in shops and department stores, many women obtained them as free giveaways with women’s magazines. A 1908 issue of Home Chat is reputed to be the first publication to give a free dress pattern to its readers (Hackney in Burman, 1999, p.75).

By the 1930s, magazines such as Woman featured simplified dressmaking processes, using a basic “key” pattern and a set of instructions to make a range of simple garments. The simplification and standardisation of dressmaking led to the offer to readers of cut-out garments in 1937.

Readers were invited to send off for ready-cut pieces of fabric; full instructions were given in the magazine, while photographs depicted each stage of assembling the garment. The pattern and style were as simple as possible. All designing was undertaken in Woman’s own fashion department, as was grading and sizing (Hackney in Burman, 1999, p.83).

The popularity of such services tends to suggest that many women had dressmaking skills and utilised a range of means to obtain their clothes; making some themselves, having others made by a dressmaker, and perhaps purchasing special items ready-made. Hackney offers statements in support of this from a number of women:
To occasionally employ a dressmaker (often a friend) seemed to be normal practice and still worked out cheaper than shop-bought…Most bought coats and items demanding greater dressmaking skills.

I made dresses, skirts, jackets, coats, I made the lot. Before the (2nd World) War people either had them made or made them themselves if they could. There wasn’t really an awful lot of ready-made that was of any consequence, if you know what I mean. If you bought ready-made it would be shoddy, you know (Hackney in Burman, 1999, pp.86-88).

The nature of women’s employment in New Zealand as it entered the twentieth century, was very similar to that of women in Britain. Domestic service and the millinery and dressmaking trades were the major avenues for the employment of women at the turn of the century, with a steady increase in the numbers of women entering factory employment from the 1890s. New Zealand also saw an increase in the numbers of women entering employment in offices, shops and teaching during and following World War One. In common with Britain, the vast majority of these women were young and unmarried. In 1921, for example, fifty-five per cent of all women in the workforce were younger than thirty, and eighty-three per cent were unmarried (Olssen in Bunkle and Hughes, 1980, pp.162-165).

In Australia, Reekie records that, by the 1920s:

Not only did more women become wage-earners, but occupations which brought women into the public eye rather than closeted away in factories and workshops required female employees to spend part of their incomes on good quality and smart work clothes. Retailers were themselves instrumental in creating a large body of female consumers from the late nineteenth century by employing women as shop assistants (Reekie, 1993, p.32).

In common with New Zealand, the number of women going into domestic service in Australia decreased from the 1890s. Married women were increasingly responsible for ensuring the smooth running of their households and they and their daughters performed both the administrative and domestic work of the house, some of which would formerly have been performed by domestic staff. According to Reekie (1993, p.34), in Australia:

the housewife became firmly entrenched as a female role in the first two decades of the twentieth century…the work of the modern housewife who emerged in the years between the wars revolved around the purchase and transformation of commodities into goods and services which the family consumed.
Phillips recognises similar tendencies in New Zealand:

This transition from a father-dominated, functional family to a mother-dominated, sentimental family was never a sudden transition. The essential cause - the separation of home and work - had occurred in much of England during the first half of the nineteenth century. The cult of sentimental domesticity that subsequently emerged in England spread to New Zealand through the import of books, magazines and migrants throughout the period of settlement. On the other hand, the relatively high cost of manufactured goods in New Zealand meant that the household never lost its productive function to the extent that it did among the middle classes of other urbanising societies. However, there is considerable evidence that during the years from about 1880 to 1920 the ideal of the sentimental nuclear family ruled over by a mother and wife became dominant in New Zealand (Phillips, 1987, p.222).

In New Zealand, Australia and America, the rise of the department store and its appeal to the female shopper was universal. Gamber says that, in the United States, “the department store achieved its greatest fame as a showcase for feminine finery. Fabrics, laces, shawls, petticoats, corsets, hats, and eventually dresses dominated its interior landscape” (Gamber, 1997, p.193). Pollon writes that, in Australia:

By Federation Year (1901) the population was once again feeling the effects of trade buoyancy which opened the way for improved conditions of employment and manufacture, and retailing felt the upsurge…The exhilaration of the Edwardian Age continued unspoilt for 13 years, with constant commercial development. Mass-produced clothing came during this time, the model salon also became part of the Sydney retail scene, and live theatre, performed in Sydney, added to “the salad days of Sydney’s progress” (Pollon, 1989, pp.8-9).

Gamber reinforces this shift in emphasis on the manner in which women’s garments were produced:

Tradeswomen and their competitors coexisted for a remarkable length of time. The self-employed craftswoman who kept no shop, the medium-sized establishment that employed twenty workers, even arguably the department store were present in both 1860 and 1900. But by the turn of the century the balance had shifted in favour of larger concerns. By 1920, department stores had won a decisive victory (Gamber, 1997, p.193).

Certainly the figures for women in the workplace in New Zealand indicate a similar situation; in 1911 there were seventeen thousand, three hundred and twenty-two dressmakers and milliners out of nineteen thousand, two hundred and seventy-five women clothing workers in total. By 1921, there were six thousand, eight hundred and sixty-eight dressmakers and milliners out of a total of thirteen thousand, eight hundred and forty-one women clothing workers. Female shop assistants increased from six hundred and twenty-seven in 1911 to seven thousand and seven in 1921. It is fairly conclusive that the ascent of mass
manufacturing and retail had an effect on the numbers of the dressmakers in the early twentieth century, but did not bring about the absolute demise of the occupation.

3.3 FACTORS UNIQUE TO NEW ZEALAND

If, as discussed previously, colonial settlement of New Zealand, Australia and the United States presented many similarities, were there any factors unique to the colonisation of New Zealand? A structure had developed in colonial New Zealand, with strong similarities and some differences to the structures in place in other colonial outposts of Great Britain, that supported population growth and allowed for the establishment of trade and commerce in urban areas. There had been a demand for the skills of dressmakers and seamstresses from the first days of colonial settlement and they were actively engaged in self-employment or employed in department store or manufacturing workrooms. Thus, a tradition of application and continuation of their craft was established very early in New Zealand.

Probably the most unique element of New Zealand’s colonial history was the relationship between the immigrants; traders, missionaries and colonisers, and Maori, the tribal indigenous people of New Zealand. Maori are reputed to have lived in the country for at least six hundred years before the first Europeans arrived. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, traders and missionaries relied on the goodwill of Maori for their survival. Some Maori tribes (iwi) recognised the opportunities for trade and exchange very early in the European’s occupation and allowed mission stations to be established and commercial enterprises to be started; a shipyard established in the Hokianga harbour in the north serves as an example of this practice (Watters, 2000, p.4).
Considerable interaction took place between the two cultures and mutual respect appears to have been fostered. Maori were not inhibited or contained by the immigrants; for example, eight Maori who had been visiting Sydney, returned on a ship with clergyman Samuel Marsden, and several missionary families, when he travelled to New Zealand to set up the first mission station. Kendall, one of the missionaries, returned to England in 1820 and was accompanied on that visit by Hongi, one of the northern chiefs (Woodhouse, 1940, pp.2-3).

However, early exchanges between the two cultures were not entirely without incident. On occasions, Europeans travelling outside tribal areas where they were afforded protection, were subject to attack and theft. Maori had divided up the country into a number of tribal areas and theirs was a long history of territorial warfare between iwi. European settlement occasionally exacerbated conflict as tribal rivalries flared over access to the Europeans and the trade opportunities that they offered. Maori valued muskets as trade items and used these, and European transportation, to settle old scores and to enforce and extend the areas under the iwi’s control. As European land purchases increased and greater opportunities for commerce and trade developed, some Maori considered that there could be advantages in formalising a relationship with the British Crown. Negotiations culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi on 6 February 1840. The signatories were representatives of the British Crown and Maori chiefs from all over the country, although the Maori population was heavily centred in the north. The English language version of the Treaty granted Britain sovereignty over New Zealand; the Maori language version maintained Maori authority over land and resources. This anomaly ultimately led to clashes between settlers and Maori, as settlers sought dominance, generally in disputes over land ownership. Outbreaks of warfare sporadically occupied iwi in the north, and the military forces representing the colonial government, for a
period of twelve years from 1860 to 1872, although there had been earlier attacks on settlers by Maori between 1843 and 1848.

Up until the late 1850s, the numbers of Maori and Pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent) in New Zealand were roughly equal. From the 1860s on, the proportion of Maori to the total population was decreasing, as they succumbed to the impact of introduced diseases and dispossession of land, and to the continuing increase in European population.\textsuperscript{xiii}

Despite occasional skirmishes over land, and cultural misunderstandings, relationships between Maori and Pakeha appear to have been mostly cordial from the earliest days of contact. Between 1800 and 1850, it was reasonably common for European men to marry Maori women, and it was not unknown for European women to marry Maori men. Olssen, in Daley and Montgomerie (1999. p.40) records that, “by the end of the (19\textsuperscript{th}) Century a sizeable portion of New Zealand’s population traced a mixed ancestry.” As organised settlement increased Pakeha numbers in the settlement areas, the geographical distribution and population numbers of the two cultures grew more and more distinct.

Settler communities, especially in the South Island, grew up having very little contact with Maori, and in the North Island, the aftermath of the conflicts of the 1860s concentrated Maori populations in the central, eastern coastal and northern regions with relatively limited contact with Europeans…The earlier history of interactions shaped by largely male Europeans minorities forming liaisons with Maori women continued in pockets of the country but overall they came to constitute a much less significant aspect of the total distribution of the population (Macdonald in Daley and Montgomerie, 1999, p.22).

The steady growth in Pakeha numbers increased the pressure to acquire Maori land for settlement. The British-appointed Governor was able to buy large tracts of land in the South Island and the lower North Island, where the numbers of Maori were less concentrated than in the heavily-populated north. Maori attitudes to the sale of their land were extremely complex; some iwi welcomed opportunities to sell in the belief that they would benefit by living alongside and providing produce and labour to Pakeha communities. To remove the necessity
of continued defense, some iwi sold land that they had historically defended against the
invasions of other iwi, whereas still other iwi resented the virtual compulsory acquisition of
their land by government in return for allocations of land elsewhere. Iwi that engaged in the
wars of the 1860s were considered by the government to be challenging British authority and
were punished with confiscation of land (Watters, 2000, pp.14-18).

The distribution of land set a pattern of Pakeha settlement and development of rural and urban
areas, with definite predominance in the urban areas. Maori retreated to the maintenance of
their communal lifestyle in predominantly rural areas; a pattern that was maintained until
young Maori moved to the cities in large numbers in the 1950s, mainly in search of
employment.

Despite the former examples, New Zealand does not appear to have suffered the excesses of
subjugation that other colonial societies have imposed on the indigenous people of a new
colony. Development of the new colony provided the same opportunities in law for all its
citizens, and peaceful co-existence ensued. It is worth noting that the Treaty of Waitangi is a
living document and is honoured to this day. In recent years, the New Zealand Government
has made reparation to several iwi in compensation for the unlawful confiscation of land, and
several claims for compensation are still in process.

Up to and including the 1920s and 1930s, more than ninety-five per cent of the non-Maori
population declared their countries of origin to be England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, in
that order (King, 2003, p.366). Immigrants from other countries were in the minority but, of
these groups, Germans were the largest in number, with the balance made up of
Scandinavians, Poles, French and Italians. The 1860s gold rush attracted Chinese immigrants
but their total number was less than three thousand by the start of the twentieth century  
(Keith, 2001, p.36-41; King, 2003, p.175). Indian, Dalmatian and Lebanese settlers arrived in  
small numbers in the early twentieth century. Jewish New Zealanders entered the country  
from the earliest days of European settlement and, “in many instances – Nathans, Levins,  
Hallensteins, Myers and others – played a prominent role in commercial and cultural  
activities” (King, 2003, p.370). Jewish families featured in apparel and footwear  
manufacturing in New Zealand, notably the Hallensteins, Levys, Nathans and Turnovskys.  
Some of the interviewed dressmakers reported that they worked for Jewish tailors and  
womenswear manufacturers, such as Nagels and Lubranskys. Despite the entry of people  
from other cultures, the overwhelming predominance of people of British descent ensured that  
being “British” remained the dominant cultural identification of Pakeha well into the  
twentieth century.

Chapter Four records a closer examination of the progression of dressmaking and apparel  
production in New Zealand.

NOTES

i Simpson states that his figures are from official sources such as New Zealand Official Yearbooks and British  
and Irish Emigration Commission reports.

ii Apparently eight hundred and four thousand, three hundred and sixty-six of these emigrants came to New  
Zealand and Australia. Of all the immigrants who entered New Zealand in the century between 1860 and 1960, more than half had done so by 1890.

iii This revision of government united predominantly British Canada and predominantly French Canada under one government.

iv Publication of the letters of Barker (1870), Courage (1896), and Godley (1936). The letters were published  
either by the women themselves or by their descendents.

v It would seem that, while most of New Zealand’s assisted colonists were intended to work as agricultural  
labourers or in domestic service (and many did), many saw greater opportunities in trade and commerce. The  
rapidly expanding population, generated by assisted immigration and the discovery of gold, increased the  
commercial opportunities, and possibly allowed many immigrants to achieve their desire to improve their  
situation in life.

vi New South Wales, on Australia’s east coast, was the first site used for the transportation of convicts, a  
practice that persisted in that area until 1840. Pollon (1989, p.2) notes that, “The main aim of the First Fleet  
(carrying the first convicts and their warders) was to establish a penal settlement. No shops were planned  
and free enterprise was not even considered. The Commissariat, which was a government store, stocked the  
necessary articles for the settlement’s survival, and suppliers of items such as grain and meat, were paid by
bank draft drawn on London, as no official coinage existed.”

The company was taken over by major United Kingdom textile company Courtaulds in 1969 (Strange, 1971, pp. 60-62). Other “drapery businesses such as David Jones (established 1838) … grew in similar fashion” (Reekie, 1993, p.xix). Examples of other businesses include Mark Foy’s (1885), Farmer’s (1840), Grace Brothers (1885), Hordern Brothers (1879), and Marcus Clark (1883).

Pollon (1989, p.5) records that, “By 1860 the population of New South Wales had soared to a total of 357,000, and by 1861 the population living in Sydney had almost doubled, to 96,000. More than any other period the gold rush brought an expansion to all areas of commerce, building, and general public service. It also provided an infusion of trained manpower with trades which, when the hopeful immigrants found no gold, they began to practise in country areas and in the developing suburbs. … As the Gold Rush fever increased, retailing settled down to a selling boom. When they failed to find their fortunes prospective employees returned to the city, and soon the stores were once more working normally, but with a largely increased business potential and a greatly increased turnover.”

Gamber has provided statistics of the number of dressmakers in the United States from 1860 to 1930, taken from United States Census records. The 1800 Census records thirty-five thousand, one hundred and sixty-five dressmakers; increasing to two hundred and ninety thousand, three hundred and eight in 1890; peaking at four hundred and forty-nine thousand, three hundred and eighty-two in 1910; and falling to one hundred and fifty-eight thousand, three hundred and eighty by 1930. Over the same period, Gamber lists the number of self-employed dressmakers in Boston alone; one hundred and thirty-three in 1846; one hundred and eighteen in 1860; three hundred and twenty-five in 1890; peaking at one thousand, one hundred and eighty-six in 1915; and falling to five hundred and three by 1930 (Gamber, 1997, her Appendix – page not numbered).

The feminization of dressmaking and millinery had occurred possibly due to the increased personal fit and body accentuation of women’s fashions and concern about the propriety of male tailors fitting female customers (Gamber, 1998, p.195).

Godey’s Lady’s Book, Sept., 1851, quoted by Emery in Burman, 1999, p.237. Godey’s Lady’s Book was an arbiter of fashion culture and was published in Philadelphia; a city at the heart of distribution networks for clothing goods and ideas in the second half of the 19th Century (Wilson in Burman, 1999, p.142).

Hackney notes that free dressmaking patterns remained a feature of women’s magazines between World War One and World War Two. She refers to Bestway Series as an example of a publisher-owned patternmaking business. Bestway “employed a staff of one hundred preparing patterns and had a factory and plant sited in Whitefriars Street, London, with a retail outfit in Oxford Street West. Bestway was an enormous success; up to 20 million patterns were circulated every year” (Hackney in Burman, 1999, p.77).

Watters, 2000; Woodhouse, 1940; Macdonald in Daley and Montgomerie, 1999.
Image Seven: In Victorian England, the conditions of those who stayed at home were frequently contrasted with the conditions of those who emigrated (Simpson, 1997, p. 41).
Image Eight: Emigration was promoted as a solution to the problems of unemployment and poverty in nineteenth century England (Simpson, 1997, p. 40).
Immigration was used to try and solve ‘the servant problem’ but the newcomers fled into the factories and shops.

Auckland Weekly News, Auckland Public Library

Image Nine: Immigration was promoted as a possible solution to address the shortage of domestic servants in the developing colony of New Zealand, but many new immigrants chose to work in other occupations (Coney, 1993, p. 224).
CHAPTER FOUR

COLONIAL SETTLEMENT IN NEW ZEALAND

Saint Evfemia is the patron saint of dressmakers, a seamstress who was martyred during the Roman emperor Diocletian’s persecutions…my grandmother remembered from her childhood going to mass on Evfemia’s day, and that afterwards, blessed needles would be distributed to the women in the congregation (Storace, 1996, pp.128-129).

Chapter Four recounts a history of sewing in New Zealand, from the efforts of the first missionaries, through the period of colonial settlement, to the industrialisation of the industry in the late nineteenth century. Diversification of the sewing trades is discussed, with identification of the numbers in employment in the various sectors.

4.1 MISSIONARY WIVES

New Zealand’s first pioneer women were the wives of the missionaries who arrived in the Bay of Islands in 1814, to set up the first mission station at Rangihoua. The establishment of mission stations in New Zealand was the dream of Samuel Marsden, a Sydney Chaplain and magistrate. He was inspired to plan a colony of artisan-missionaries after meeting a group of Maori visitors to Australia.¹

The Church Missionary Society was founded in England in 1799, as part of the Evangelical movement that followed the disordered social conditions of the Regency period. The Evangelists were generally from the middle classes and possessed of a strong religious faith that they felt compelled to share with others. This commitment enabled them to accept the isolation and basic lifestyle of missionary work on the other side of the world (Drummond, 1960, p.12).
Drummond (1967, p.8) records that Marsden advised the missionary families to take only the most necessary possessions with them to New Zealand, fearing that their safety could be compromised if they had an abundance of clothing or other articles of any value to Maori. Consequently the mission’s efforts at survival and the education of the indigenous adults and children were often frustrated by a lack of pins, needles, pencils, and other portable items. A letter written by missionary Thomas Kendall to the Church Missionary Society, on 19 October 1815, ten months after his arrival in New Zealand, requested that articles of clothing, fish-hooks, knives, scissors, knitting needles, and pins and needles for sewing, be sent as soon as possible (Drummond, 1960, p.9).

Hannah King, who arrived in New Zealand with her missionary husband in 1814, is described as having been a good needlewoman and there are records of examples of her fine needlework worked on garments made for her husband and son (Drummond, 1967, p.112). An embroidered shirt, looking rather like a nightshirt, believed to have been made for John King by his wife, is held in the Onga Onga Museum, according to Ebbett (1977).

Mrs Leigh, wife of Reverend Samuel Leigh, joined her husband in the Bay of Islands in 1822 at the mission station he had established. She taught the local Maori women to sew and is credited with devising an ingenious method for preventing the infanticide that the Maori women practised. She noticed that the women took pride in seeing their babies dressed in the same manner as Pakeha (European New Zealanders) babies. She taught her pupils to make several sets of babies’ dresses and encouraged them to let their families know that any woman who brought her baby to the mission, only after it was two weeks old, could have a dress for the child. Mrs Leigh had observed that, if a Maori woman could be induced to preserve the
life of her child for around twelve to fourteen days, the maternal bond was then sufficiently developed to ensure the child’s life was safe from destruction (Woodhouse, 1940, pp.6-7).

Marianne Williams arrived in KeriKeri in 1823. She established a school for the local Maori girls and set a high teaching standard. When the captain of a coastal whaling boat was killed in 1844, she gathered together a group of women, including Maori girls from her sewing class, to stitch the traditional widow’s “weeds” for his widow. In two short days the women constructed a full-skirted black dress with a fitted, boned bodice, utilising approximately fifteen yards of fabric (Drummond, 1967, p.117).

Mary Ann Williams (no relation to the above) taught sewing at the Paihia school for Maori girls from 1831 until she transferred to the KeriKeri mission where she married missionary James Preece in 1833. Her pupils made her wedding dress; a full-skirted gown of biscuit cambric, with a crossed “Empire” bodice and full sleeves. The low neckline was covered with a fichu of fine net banded with biscuit lawn (Drummond, 1967, p.116).

Three subsequent mission stations had been established from 1819 to 1823, all in the Bay of Islands area, but their requirements for articles and supplies were met to a certain extent by the establishment of the Mission Store at KeriKeri in 1820 (see Image Ten, p. 108). This elegant stone building, which survives to this day, was the issuing point for rations and held articles of value to the communities. Until well into the 1830s, supplies were often extremely limited and occasionally non-existent, at least until the arrival of the next boat. Mission Store books, from the period 1823 to 1832, provide a record of the variety of stock and the range of prices. Sewing thread was sold by weight and fabric by the yard, with mention of sheeting, dungaree for shirts and trousers, brown holland (unbleached linen), blue linen, floral chintzes
and pink gingham. Commercial competition was non-existent until the 1828 opening of a trading station at Wahapu (Drummond, 1967 p.115).

Mission wives were not particularly influenced by the dictates of fashion, although their high-waisted, ankle-length dresses and Regency bonnets reflected the fashionable dress of the time. Few concessions were made to address the effects of the temperate climate of the north of New Zealand, or of the roughness of the terrain, with its dense bush, muddy tracks and unbridged rivers. Priority was given to keeping the family clothed and it was a seemingly endless task. Children of both sexes were taught to knit and sew from a very young age and the mission wives regarded sewing as essential to the education of Maori girls. The missionaries used clothing to barter for food with Maori. Maori women were encouraged to adopt European clothing but made their own adaptations to style, preferring a loose blouse over a full skirt (Ebbett, 1977, p.1; Coney, 1993, p.156).

Marianne Williams, wife of the Reverend Henry Williams, the missionary leading the mission station established in Paihia, Bay of Islands in 1823, was responsible for providing the first consistent, detailed record of domestic life in New Zealand. Her journals and letters span a period of approximately fifty-seven years, from 1823 to 1880 (Drummond, 1967, p.114; Woodhouse, 1940, p.10). The Williams family appears to have been the first to emigrate with any quantity of personal possessions, including furniture, household china, curtains and books. They also appear to have galvanised the Williams family in England to organise the collection of clothing, books, toys and games for dispatch to New Zealand once they were established in their new home (Drummond, 1967). The arrival of boxes from England generated a great deal of excitement in the mission communities, and the inclusion of ready-made clothing alleviated some of the burden of sewing for the mission wives. Drummond (1967), records that Marianne wrote to her family in 1828:
In gratitude to you all for the kind assistance you have given me in presenting us with so many “stitches”, I have determined that it is our duty to express our thanks by setting aside a portion of our evenings, at least once a week, to write to you who have so kindly worked for us, and in fact by so doing, have given us the capability of doing so…Thus I am enabled to strike off my list two frocks for Marianne, a better dress for Thomas, and some common trousers for the hot weather, night caps for Marianne, shirts for the boys, caps for Old Mother to please her husband by discarding ugly old ones (although one of the new ones is rather too smart). To add to all this I must not omit to thank you for the bonnet and hats, which will relieve the children from many a perspiration beneath a Scotch woollen cap (Drummond, 1967, p.114).

Evidence records that the missionary communities were small isolated centres of European civilisation in a country widely inhabited by Maori tribes. There are several recorded examples of heroic behaviour on the part of the missionary wives but, by and large, they are related to the privations of surviving, maintaining a home, and coping with birth and death in an untamed landscape rather than conflict with Maori.

Had the Maoris resented the intrusion of the missionaries and attacked them, there was no human power available to prevent their destruction (Woodhouse, 1940, p.11).

4.2 COLONIAL SETTLEMENT

New Zealand was not recognised as a British possession until 1840. Prior to this date, there was no attempt at organised colonisation, although the number of British residents was gradually increasing, mainly with itinerant traders, whalers and sailors. New Zealand at this stage was an extension of the commercial world of Sydney and many of the early British settlers came via New South Wales. The British Government appointed Captain William Hobson R.N. as Lieutenant-Governor of New Zealand and, on 6 February 1840, the treaty of Waitangi was signed with Maori chiefs. In doing so, they acknowledged sovereignty of the British Queen and New Zealand became a British possession. Russell, adjacent to Waitangi and Paihia in the Bay of Islands, was designated the capital.

During the period 1840 to 1852 there were three main flows of British and Irish migrants.\textsuperscript{v} The New Zealand Company’s assisted immigration policy accounted for the largest number and they were directed to the Company’s five settlements in Wellington, Nelson, New
Plymouth, Otago and Canterbury. Free migrants, many of whom came from Australia, constituted the second flow and made a major contribution to the population of Auckland province. Auckland also benefited from the third flow, a group of military men and their families, known as the Royal New Zealand Fencibles (Phillips, “A Home away from ‘Home’,” n.d.). The settlements of Dunedin and Christchurch received founding immigrants in 1848 and 1850.

Many of the immigrants came from rural and pre-industrial backgrounds in Britain and chose to migrate to a new country in preference to moving to British cities and into factory employment. Because of their rural backgrounds, they were attracted to the possibility of sustaining an independent living as small land-holders and valued the opportunity to be “free” (Phillips, “A Home away from’Home’,” n.d.).

The settlers were warned of the lack of opportunities to purchase clothing in the new colony and were advised to bring with them a good stock of clothes, particularly working clothes, (Pearce, 1982). In the New Zealand Company’s publication, New Zealand Journal, circulated from 1840, women were advised to bring, amongst other items, two gowns or eighteen yards of printed cotton, and twelve work shifts or thirty yards of longcloth (Ebbett, 1977, p.12). In 1849 G. B. Earp published a Handbook For Intending Emigrants to the Southern Settlements of New Zealand. It listed suggestions for complete wardrobe requirements, and is interesting in the variations in perceived requirements for the labouring classes and the gentry. A gentleman, in contrast to a labouring man, was perceived to have a requirement for fifty-two more shirts than the labouring man, plus a variety of cravats, some twenty-eight pairs of gloves, and many other items of finery. (See Appendix One)
Populations of the various centres grew very rapidly. The four largest provinces of Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury and Otago had populations of approximately twenty-four thousand; twelve thousand; sixteen thousand; and twenty-seven thousand respectively, registered in the 1861 census. The capital was transferred to Auckland in 1841 and the growth and progress of this town in those first years was extremely rapid, from a population of just under three thousand in 1842 to just over nine thousand by 1852. Eliza Hobson, wife of the, by now, Governor, had hosted dinner parties of up to eighteen people when Government House was in Russell. There were many visitors and a small group of officials, comprising mainly naval and military officers, to entertain (Woodhouse, 1940, p.11). When she moved to the new Government House in Auckland, she wrote to her friend Emma Hamilton Smith:

We have a very nice little Society, and numbers are arriving daily, it is really quite astonishing to see how the houses are springing up, they really appear to arise by magic…(Drummond, 1960, p.55)

Image Eleven (p.109) gives two views of Auckland, in the 1840s and 1870s, demonstrating the growth of the city.

4.3 MAINTAINING THE WARDROBE

The social life that developed in the towns followed dress conventions and women faced the frustrations of trying to procure a ballgown or silk stockings in the largely undeveloped country. Wealthy immigrants arrived in New Zealand largely well-equipped and could potentially return to England in the future to restock wardrobes. New Zealand women, particularly those of some means, seemed to be determined to keep up with current fashions in England. There are several examples of letters (Barker, 1870; Courage, 1896; Godley, 1936) written in the 1840s and 1850s to female relatives in England requesting information on the latest fashions. Wives and daughters, when they were at work, wore simpler dress,
invariably protected with an apron, but all other occasions called for more fashionable clothes (Pearce, 1982, p.168).

The first New Zealand Company settlers brought with them the current Victorian style; full dome-shaped long skirts over several petticoats and a tightly-fitted, V-fronted separate bodice over a tightly-laced corset. During the 1850s, fashion became less restrictive. The regular arrival of ships from England, to a number of New Zealand ports, led to some improvement in communications, and news of fashion trends was conveyed more rapidly amongst a larger population. Trade was booming and the classes in society were beginning to overlap and mingle. The wares of a growing number of shops were available to a wider range of customers, regardless of their perceived class.\textsuperscript{ix}

Early 1860s and 1870s photos of Auckland show approximately fifty commercial premises lining the main street, the majority two or three stories high, with display window frontages. There is also a second, third and fourth tier of buildings behind this street frontage. Wellington grew with similar speed. According to McLean (2000, pp.69-70):

\begin{quote}
… there were twenty-one merchant businesses…In an economy too small for much specialisation, most did a bit of everything …Thirty-two-year-old Jewish merchant Nathaniel Levin opened a drapery business on Lambton Quay in mid-1841 that soon expanded into a substantial general merchant house and exporter.
\end{quote}

As the population grew, a wide variety of social occasions created constant work for any number of dressmakers: balls, soirees, opera, dinner parties and garden parties were organised in many settlements. These events were attended by members of the commercial and industrial elite, rural landed gentry, and those involved in government.

For those living in isolated areas, the visits of pedlars\textsuperscript{x} on horseback provided access to goods. The alternative was to make the long journey on horseback or by coach to the nearest
town, a trip perhaps taken only once per year. Most settlers simply had to make do with very limited resources. Nothing was wasted in the pioneer communities, particularly when applied to clothing. Food and shelter could be acquired from local Maori or from natural resources, but clothing could not be easily replaced. With all manufactured goods having to be imported on infrequent ships, every item became valuable. Finances also often determined that clothes with any wear left in them, (especially when they included up to twenty yards of fabric), were patched, darned, altered to new designs, or taken apart to make children’s clothes, quilts, and floor rugs. Image Twelve (p. 110) shows a young woman undertaking the arduous chores of laundering clothing and household linens. The nineteenth century immigrants from Britain and Europe brought a variety of practical skills with them, including the ability to sew, knit and weave. Many who came to New Zealand were already highly versatile people who came from a background where they combined occupations and lived an unspecialised life both working on traditional crafts and tending the land. Families were frequently large and pioneer women spent many hours, when everything was made by hand, sewing, knitting, and darning.

Pioneer women fitted bodice patterns for one another from the time that the new fashions of the late 1830s arrived in New Zealand. This part of a dress was intricately seamed, and designed to fit without a wrinkle. Sleeves were more at the mercy of fashion’s whims; material was put aside when a dress was made for necessary replacements, and another favoured economy was for a skirt to have two detachable bodices, one with a high neck for wearing in the daytime and the other low-cut for the evening. Hours of patient stitching from hands that were already overburdened went into these elaborate garments (Drummond, 1967, pp.116-117).

The earliest known attempt to invent a sewing machine was made in London in 1790 by Thomas Saint, who designed a machine for sewing leather. He patented the design but it was not manufactured for commercial use. It took until 1830 before a machine was produced in quantity and used for manufacturing purposes, when Bartholemy Thimonier, a French tailor, patented a successful chainstitch machine. Development of the sewing machine steadily progressed in France, America and England, but it was not until American Isaac Singer patented his original machine in 1851, and embarked on a successful marketing
programme, that a sewing machine readily available for commercial and domestic use was sold (Head, 1982, pp.3-7). It was some years before they reached New Zealand and then mainly for commercial use (Pearce, 1982, pp.171-172). The sewing machine was an unobtainable luxury for many pioneer women and they were still hand sewing clothes for their families late into the night for much of the remainder of the nineteenth century (Ebbett, 1977, p.1). During the 1860s it was really only established dressmakers and tailors who took advantage of the labour-saving machines but, by the 1870s, they had begun to appear in the home for domestic use. Olssen (1995, p. 75) records that between 1880 and 1895, over one hundred and fifteen thousand sewing and knitting machines were imported from Britain and the United States of America. Image Thirteen (p. 111) shows a woman sewing on a lockstitch machine around 1868.

4.4 Dressmakers

Women who sewed professionally were encouraged to emigrate to New Zealand by the New Zealand Company, and the first nine ships included nineteen seamstresses, six dressmakers and three milliners, all given free passage (Ebbett, 1977 p.8).

In mid nineteenth century Britain, dressmaking was considered suitable employment for a young woman, preferable to working in a factory or domestic service. In theory the young woman served an apprenticeship of two or three years, a period as an “improver”, then progressed to third, second, and first “hand”. In practice, employers often wanted to keep women at a particular level, and this limited the experience that the women gained. Apprentices paid a monetary premium for their two to five year apprenticeship and generally faced low wages on completion. There were three main areas of employment in the second half of the nineteenth century; independent dressmaking businesses, dressmaking linked with
drapers’ and department stores, and itinerant or home dressmaking. Although the number of free needlewomen or seamstresses fluctuated, there was usually an excess of supply over demand in Britain, and the women worked long hours to make a living wage.iii

Emigration to the colonies was seen as a possible solution to the excess of needlewomen (see Image Fourteen: p. 112). As early as 1842, eleven women listed as seamstresses arrived in Nelson. Thirty-two women listed as dressmakers or some other apparel-related occupation arrived in Auckland in 1851, but most went into domestic service. Of the approximately four thousand young single women who arrived in the Canterbury Province as assisted immigrants in the 1850s and 1860s, one hundred and seventy-seven were milliners, dressmakers, seamstresses, or needlewomen (Malthus, 1992, p.81). The New Zealand Directory (Stevens and Bartholomew) for 1866-67 listed (by name) the following:

- Dressmakers / Milliners
- Auckland – 37
- Wellington – 6
- Blenheim – 1
- Christchurch – 24
- Dunedin – 23
- Invercargill – 7
- Kaiwharawhara – 1
- Lyttelton – 6
- Nelson – 3
- Onehunga – 2
- Richmond – 4
(Pearce, 1982, p.239)

This list of towns and small settlements represents quite an extensive coverage of the country from north to south, although excludes settlements in Taranaki, the east coast of the North Island and the extreme north, and the west coast of the South Island; all areas that had been settled for some time by the mid-1860s. Given these omissions, and the fact that two thousand and thirty-nine dressmaker/milliners are recorded in the 1874 Census just seven to eight years later, the list certainly does not record the entire dressmaking workforce. It is interesting to note that the largest numbers of dressmakers were recorded in Auckland, the
capital from 1842; Christchurch, centre of a well organised assisted settlement programme; and Dunedin, located close to the area of the 1860s discoveries of gold.

Jane Malthus, an authority on the history of dress in New Zealand and a former lecturer at Otago University, has made a significant contribution to the study of dressmakers in nineteenth century New Zealand. She contends that evidence of the expansion of dressmaking as an occupation as the colony developed implies that there was some interest in keeping up with changing fashions, otherwise purely functional garments could have continued to be made within the families’ capabilities. Taking her evidence from Almanacs, street directories, advertisements in newspapers, and the Census from 1874 on, she concludes that dressmaking was a popular area of paid employment for women in nineteenth century New Zealand, second only to domestic service. However, she notes that, from her investigations, it is difficult to be conclusive about the exact numbers of women working in this occupation (Malthus, 1991, pp.3-4).

The number fluctuated as women moved in and out of the trade according to their circumstances. Young single women might train and start their own businesses but cease work on marriage or childbirth. For women forced to take up employment through widowhood or unexpected poverty, dressmaking or another of the related sewing trades was an obvious choice, but if their financial security improved it was just as easily given up (Malthus, 1991, p.3).

Malthus also rationalises that dressmaking was an extremely flexible method of obtaining an income for single and married women, taking into account a variety of circumstances and causing minimal disruption to family life.

Before mechanisation revolutionised the clothing industry, sewing work was reasonably portable. It could be done within the home of the worker or her employer, and therefore combined with child care or other domestic duties. It could be interrupted to attend to family concerns without spoiling or suffering. Sewing done in these circumstances may have been outwork for an employer or dressmaking commissioned by a client, such was the possible scope and diversity of the work (Malthus, 1992, p.76).

Women could work at home where the work could be picked up and put down as necessary, so that the domestic routine for the rest of the family was maintained (Malthus, 1992, p.87).
From 1874, the occupations of “milliner, dressmaker”, “tailor” and “tailoress” were listed in the New Zealand Census. Up until the 1890s, dressmakers were frequently milliners as well, and vice versa; tailors were almost exclusively male; and tailoresses were women hired by tailors to carry out routine sewing. The following tables show the numbers of people classified as milliner, dressmakers (Table 1) and tailor, tailoresses (Table 2), from 1874 to 1896.

**TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PERSONS OCCUPIED AS MILLINER, DRESSMAKER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Female Workforce*</th>
<th>% of female workforce as Milliner, Dressmaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>2039</td>
<td>2039</td>
<td></td>
<td>14 483</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>2858</td>
<td>2858</td>
<td></td>
<td>21 356</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>3658</td>
<td>3658</td>
<td></td>
<td>24 826</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>5472</td>
<td>5472</td>
<td></td>
<td>32 580</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>6613</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6602</td>
<td>42 992</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>7441</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7433</td>
<td>51 589</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**TABLE 2: NUMBER OF PERSONS OCCUPIED AS TAILOR, TAILORESS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Female Workforce</th>
<th>% of female workforce as Tailoresses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>14 483</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>1207</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>21 356</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>1457</td>
<td>1041</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>24 826</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>2358</td>
<td>1289</td>
<td>1069</td>
<td>32 580</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>4254*</td>
<td>1704</td>
<td>2550</td>
<td>42 992</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>4561*</td>
<td>2108</td>
<td>2453</td>
<td>51 589</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


There were several distinct categories of clothing makers, although the term needlewomen applied to all women who earned their living by sewing. Advertisements started appearing in newspapers from the 1840s, seeking qualified dressmakers, or young women willing to train under an informal apprenticeship system that seems to have been modelled on the English practice. Dressmakers who had set up their own businesses advertised for other dressmakers to work with them or for apprentices to train. Drapery businesses advertised for
experienced dressmakers or milliners to work in their millinery, dressmaking or tailoring workrooms.\textsuperscript{xv}

Malthus (1991, p.7) records that the wording of advertisements in newspapers and trade directories suggested that many dressmakers ran their businesses from their homes or from small commercial premises. Some dressmakers worked as outworkers for established dressmakers or stores, and yet another group worked for families in their homes for periods of days or weeks. This group travelled from one family to another, staying as long as was required to complete the new season’s wardrobe and replenish the household linens.\textsuperscript{xvi} This practice appears to have continued well into the twentieth century. ED, born in 1907, remembers that when she was very young, the dressmaker used to come into the family home for a few days.

The dressmaker used to come in and sew for the three youngest girls … Whenever my mother had the change of clothes, you know, changeover of seasons probably. We were always well dressed, and my mother couldn’t sew a stitch (ED, personal interview, June 2001).

Mechanisation of the sewing trades and the growth of the dressmaking and woollen industries in the 1880s attracted many young women to factory employment. It was perceived as having shorter hours and better pay than domestic service, traditionally the largest area of paid employment for women during the nineteenth century (Coney, 1993, p.210). New Zealand Census figures reveal the growth and/or decline of the defined classifications from 1881 to 1936, as shown in Table 3.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lrrrrrr}
\hline
Year: & 1881 & 1891 & 1901 & 1911 & 1921 & 1936 \\
\hline
Dressmakers & Milliners & 3658 & 6602 & 10 299 & 17 322 & 6868 & 5914 \\
Machinists & 298 & 2550* & 382 & 1286 & 2825 & 3716 \\
Others in & 638 & 1090 & 1136 & 667 & 4148 & 12 762 \\
Clothing & & & & & & \\
\hline
Total: & 4594 & 10 242 & 11 817 & 19 275 & 13 841 & 22 392 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Table 3}
\end{table}

*For this year tailoresses were included with machinists. Classifications for occupations in the clothing industry changed often (Cited in Olssen, 1980, p.163).
From the 1880s women were increasingly employed in the growing number of factories and workrooms. Once the processes of making garments were broken down into simple repetitive operations, less training was required to teach inexperienced sewing machine operators how to complete them. The intense competition generated by the large number of production units forced prices and wages down.

Olssen (1995, p. 73) notes that it was really only in the clothing industry that women had access to trades defined as skilled, at least by early twentieth century definitions. However, while considerable opportunities existed for women to work in the factories, the clothing trades to an extent, were able to resist the separation of home and work typical of this post-industrial period, by continuing to allow for women to work from home if they chose to do so. The trades of dressmaking, millinery, embroidery and needlework could suitably be combined with the discharge of traditional domestic duties and the rearing of children. Olssen records that:

Sewing, dressmaking and millinery – not to mention various other branches of needlework and clothes making – provided women with some of the opportunities that skilled men enjoyed. The women invariably earned less when they sold their labour (women in employment were paid between half and two-thirds of the male rate), but this disadvantage ended if they practised their craft on their own account (Olssen, 1995, pp. 88-89).


No source allows us to estimate the proportion of women who worked in the large clothing factories as against the number in the bespoke sector … Our inability to distinguish the proportions working in the factory and bespoke sectors means that we cannot give a figure for the relative proportions of unskilled and skilled. Those entering the bespoke sector served a four-year apprenticeship … Once the apprenticeship had been served … the women had acquired all the skills necessary to make an entire dress, coat, hat, etc. Working conditions in the bespoke sector were not appealing, although they might vary with the firm’s size. In small bespoke firms the premises were usually unheated, draughty, poorly lit, poorly ventilated and lacked adequate facilities such as toilets. Employers, although usually trained in some branch of the craft, often ‘drove’ and ‘sweated’ their workers … Like men workers, however, the women rarely complained about conditions, but vigilantly guarded their handicraft status …

The bespoke and factory sectors produced clothes for different markets and organised the work in different ways. In factories the work was organised by garment and the relevant tasks. Minute subdivisions of the work done on each garment, each done by machine, allowed manufacturers to replace skilled with unskilled labour … The sewing machine provides the key to the intricate subdivision of processes. Although invented in 1850, only in the late nineteenth century did steam-driven machines replace the treadle and make mass production possible … Dressmaking and millinery, by comparison,
proved more resistant to mechanisation throughout this period, handwork and treadle machines remaining the stock-in-trade equipment.

Some of the first labour legislation passed in New Zealand was introduced to regulate the employment of women. The Employment of Females Act 1873 restricted the number of hours that women could work in factories to eight hours per day, but many employers ignored this. In many workplaces, lighting and heating were poor, toilets and lunchrooms were non-existent, and deductions were taken from wages for broken needles or alleged damage to machines (Coney, 1993, p.220). Recognition of the low pay and appalling conditions eventually led to the formation of the so-called Sweating Commission in 1890. “Sweating” was a word originally used in Britain to describe employment conditions where workers were poorly paid and overworked. The Commission’s report led to a series of reforms in working hours and conditions for women and children in shops and factories. Image Fifteen (p. 113) provides an example of working conditions in clothing manufacturing in nineteenth century New Zealand.

During the same period the first New Zealand women’s trade union was formed, the Dunedin Tailoresses’ Union. Dunedin was the most highly industrialised city in New Zealand in the nineteenth century. Twenty-seven per cent of its workforce was employed in clothing manufacturing and women represented eighty per cent of this number. The Dunedin union encouraged the formation of similar unions throughout the country. The union campaigned for improvements in factory legislation and supported women’s suffrage. The dressmaking trade was slower to adapt to industrialisation and less suited to doing so. Women’s fashionable dress, with its firm fit and elaborate drapings and trimmings, did not lend itself to factory methods of production. It wasn’t until fashion became simpler in style in the 1890s, with jacket, blouse and skirt outfits becoming popular, that dressmaking workrooms could
introduce some industrial techniques and begin to produce ready-to-wear garments (Coney, 1993, p.220).

The 1991 publication *The Book of New Zealand Women Ko Kui Ma Te Kaupapa* lists five dressmakers amongst its over three hundred biographical essays. This collection of biographical portraits records the lives and work of both well-known and virtually unknown New Zealand women, including Maori Women, from the twelfth century into the 1980s. Its purpose was to illustrate the diversity of activities that women have been involved in and the wide variety of directions that their lives have followed.

It includes Lydia Burr who emigrated to Nelson with her family at the age of twelve in 1850. When her marriage ended in the late 1870s, she supported herself and her ten children by taking in boarders and working as a dressmaker and milliner from her home, often sewing by lamplight until two o’clock in the morning, according to the recollections of her children. (Macdonald, Penfold, Williams, 1991, pp.109-111). Harriet Simpson arrived in Canterbury in 1850. Following her husband’s death, she raised five orphaned children in addition to her own daughter. She eventually became matron of a home for unemployed or convalescing women. In the late 1870s, on her retirement, she established a dressmaking business in her home in Christchurch (Macdonald, Penfold, Williams, 1991, pp.609-611). Margaret and Mary Alcorn were born in New Zealand in the 1860s. Neither woman ever married and, determined to have their own business, they opened a shop in Wellington in 1906. The shop imported goods directly from Liberty’s London, carrying an extensive stock including fabrics, pottery, silverware, and carpets. Mary managed the shop and Margaret worked in it as a dressmaker. Following Mary’s death in 1928, Margaret managed the shop from her sewing machine by the windows overlooking the street. She continued until the business was forced
into liquidation during the Depression of the 1930s (Macdonald, Penfold, Williams, 1991, pp.6-8).

In conclusion, history has demonstrated that, by the end of the nineteenth century, a strong practice of dressmaking, both professionally and for one’s own family, had been established in New Zealand. Dressmakers worked from their homes; in independent business establishments; as intinerant makers working in the homes of their clients; and in employment as dressmakers in the department stores. From the 1880s, as apparel production methods became mechanised, many women were employed as seamstresses or tailoresses in the clothing factories. In the first decades of the twentieth century, dressmaking would face competition as a popular occupation for women, from employment opportunities in factories, offices, and retail shops, but dressmakers who catered to individual clients continued to flourish for some years to come. The twentieth century context, with particular emphasis on the implications for dressmakers, will be discussed more extensively in Chapter Five.

NOTES

i Marsden anticipated that the missionaries would live among the Maori, teaching them useful trades and preaching the adoption of a Christian way of life. He presented his proposal to the Church Missionary Society in England in 1808 and, after securing the offer of protection and support for the missionaries from local chief Ruatara, the proposal became an actuality in 1814 (Drummond, 1967, p.xi).

ii Pauline Mackie, Manager of the Onga Onga Museum, has confirmed that the Museum has, in its collection, a shirt that fits this description. The Museum’s collection has been poorly catalogued and Pauline had no records of the shirt’s origins. The approach by the writer of this thesis has given them a lead for further investigation.

iii The Mission Store books are held in the private collection of the Kemp family. James Kemp was the blacksmith to the Church Missionary Society from 1819 to 1852 and also the storekeeper from 1822 until some time in the 1850s. He and his wife, Charlotte Kemp, built their house opposite the Mission Store in 1832. In 1974 their great-grandson, Ernest Kemp, presented their house, the oldest existing building in New Zealand, to the nation (Pickmere, N. Kemp, Charlotte 1790 -1860; Kemp, James 1797 - 1872. Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, updated 31 July 2003. URL: http://www.dnzb.govt.nz).

iv The Letters and Journals of Marianne Williams, for the period 1825 to 1830, are held in the Auckland War Memorial Museum Library.

v Organised colonisation of New Zealand received a significant boost with the formation of the New Zealand Company in England in 1839. The main architect of this was Edward Wakefield who, along with his brothers Arthur and William, held radical theories on colonisation based on Britain’s need for an expanding
economy. William represented the Company in New Zealand in late 1839 and made large purchases of North Island land from Maori, for the purpose of selling it to intending colonists (Simpson, 1997, pp.50-51, p.65; Woodhouse, 1940, p.321).

According to Simpson (1997, p.60), at the start of systemic colonisation in 1840, the European population of New Zealand was between two thousand and three thousand in total. By 1851, the first national census showed that it had grown to twenty-six thousand, seven hundred and seven (non-Maori residents), and to nearly three hundred thousand by 1874 (Macdonald, 1999, p.24).

Eliza Hobson wrote most of her letters to her close friend Emma Hamilton Smith. This excerpt is taken from a letter to Emma dated 22 January 1841.

G. B. Earp, in his handbooks, remarked that the residents of Auckland paid more attention to dress and maintained greater formality of manner than in the other settlements. He also noted that there was little in the dress of the people to remind a stranger that he was away from England except, perhaps, if they were occasionally, unintentionally, a little behind fashion (Drummond, 1967, p.168).

Hodgson (1992, p.3) reports that from the point that Auckland became the capital city in 1840, “There was already a handful of businessmen waiting in the wings to establish trading concerns on the Waitemata Harbour and, in a sense, commerce may be said to have all but pre-empted the city’s foundation. Opportunity, real or perceived, was a powerful fuel for commerce and resulted in numerous concerns offering basic goods like clothes and food. There was also a number of shops selling luxury goods and a range of imports that would have been atypical of a distant outpost or a mere frontier settlement.

Woodhouse (1940), quoted in Ebbett (1977, p.1), speaks about Mrs Birdling who, “after the pedlar’s visit with his laden packhorse … sewed by the dim light of smoking candles, night in, night out.”

Eighty machines were installed in a Paris shop, the first garment factory to use sewing machines.

Archives New Zealand, 10 Mulgrave Street, Thorndon, Wellington, holds many records of immigration to New Zealand, including the New Zealand Company embarkation registers 1839 - 1850 (document NZC 34).

Dressmakers specialised in making fitted dresses, mantles, robes, cloaks, and sometimes underclothing for women. Their work was regarded as intricate and highly-skilled. Seamstresses were employed by dressmakers, drapery stores, and dressmaking departments of large department stores, or as outworkers. They stitched and finished garments for men or women, and sewed by hand or machine. Milliners Traditionally completed entire costumes for their clients but moved to specialising in headwear production exclusively as the nineteenth century progressed. Tailoresses were employed by tailors to undertake routine sewing operations. The term was later applied to all women employed in the making of menswear. Tailors were almost exclusively male and specialised in the production of men’s suits and outerwear and, occasionally, tailored garments for women, such as riding jackets (Malthus, 1991, p.5).

Malthus (1992, p.83) provides examples of dressmakers and drapers advertising for staff in the Nelson Examiner in 1843, the Otago Witness in 1860 and 1861.

Image Ten: The Stone Store, established by the Church Missionary Society in KeriKeri in 1820.
Image Eleven: Two views of early Auckland; the first featuring Fort Street in 1843 (from a pen and wash drawing by Edward Ashworth) and the second featuring Queen Street in the 1870s; giving some indication of the growth of the city (Platts, 1971, p. 63; New Zealand Herald, 13 November 2003, p. E20).
Image Twelve: Washday in the early twentieth century was arduous work (New Zealand Herald, 13 November 2003, p. E18).
Image Thirteen: A woman working at a lockstitch sewing machine, circa 1868
(source unknown; from a collection of material given to the researcher by John Webster, Property Host, Ewelme Cottage, Parnell, Auckland).
Women were particularly vulnerable in the unregulated labour markets of mid-nineteenth century Britain. Opportunities to earn an income were often limited to low-paid piecework. Emigration, and the possibility of marriage in the new colonies, were attractive propositions (Simpson, 1997, p. 126).
Image Fifteen: An example of the overcrowded and often unsuitable working conditions of clothing manufacture in nineteenth century New Zealand (Coney, 1993, p. 223).
CHAPTER FIVE
CLOTHING AND TEXTILES; ESTABLISHING AN INFRASTRUCTURE

Marriage was of particular importance. It was the only real security, the only life style within which one could raise a family, the only relationship with a man that gave the woman legal protection - and for some it was the only alternative to becoming a maiden aunt, living year after year at home caring for ageing parents. Fathers who could afford it kept their daughters at home and dependent on them, and those who did not marry gradually evolved into the companion-nurse-housekeeper of their parents (Ebbett, 1981, pp.103-104).

In the first half of the twentieth century increasing numbers of men left their households to go to a place of work, as opposed to being engaged in employment on their land. A separation between home and work developed, and the home and family became the domain of women. There was considerable emphasis on the ideal of the “sentimental domestic family” (Phillips, 1987, p.225) where the man went out to work and returned in the evening to the loving haven that his wife had created for him and their children. Government policy; advocates for the promotion of the health of women and children; a number of women’s organisations and, to an extent, the trade unions, all supported this ideal. There was widespread expectation that married women would not work outside the home and the trade unions argued that a man’s earnings should be sufficient to support his wife and family. This chapter considers the impact that this environment had on the employment of women and the practice of dressmaking. Competitors to dressmakers, in the supply of apparel, are identified, as are the resources available to dressmakers. The evaluations and experiences of the interviewed dressmakers are included as primary verification of the context.

5.1 SETTING THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT IN NEW ZEALAND

Eighteen dressmakers were interviewed for the purposes of this study. A full list of the participants can be found in Appendix Two. Collated responses to the questions can be found
in Appendix Three. The dressmakers were each asked the same questions; a total of fifty questions that were categorised into eleven groups. For the complete list of questions and their groupings, refer to Chapter Two (2.3.4).

The dressmakers who form the focus of this study were all, except for one, born in New Zealand. Two were born in 1907; a further three were born pre 1920 and another three just post 1920; six were born in 1930 or ’31; and the remaining four during World War Two. The New Zealand that the older dressmakers grew up in was a country that was in the process of evolving from pre-industrial to modern; a process that Olssen (1980) contends spanned a distinct period from 1880 to 1926. During this period, the population of New Zealand became predominately urbanised. The 1926 Census recorded that there were one point four million New Zealanders; two-thirds of whom lived in urban areas. In 1926, only three point five per cent of married women were in paid employment (Phillips, 1987).

However, for unmarried women, there was a substantial increase in the range of occupational opportunities during this period. Domestic service, the traditional area of employment for young women, decreased in popularity as women showed a preference for factory, shop, and office work. While women were encouraged to relinquish their positions to returning soldiers following the end of World War One, significant gains were made in various fields, particularly the office sector. The overall trend was to increasing numbers of women in the workforce generally, but the fields of employment remained in the domestic or hotel service, clothing industry, office, and retail shop categories (Coney, 1993). In 1874 only eleven point one per cent of women were in paid employment; by 1921 women made up twenty point seven per cent of the workforce (Olssen, 1980).
Throughout the period of World War One and the 1920s, fashionable dress for women became the least restrictive it had been for a hundred years. This move coincided with widening work and social opportunities for women in New Zealand. The War swept away traditional concepts of female elegance. A whole world of attitudes was overturned and one of the effects was the acceleration of the emancipation of clothing. Women replacing men at work or raising funds in the streets or organising food parcels for soldiers did not want to be hampered by impractical and inconvenient clothing, and needed working clothes. In addition, there was simply no time to devote to amassing endless outfits, and the supply of servants to care for them also began to diminish.

For young women in particular, the 1920s brought great social freedoms. Weekly dances, cinema visits, picnics and sports activities were all available in towns, especially to women in work. Rural areas regularly held dances in local halls. “Fashionable” dress was now designed for young, lithe, healthy figures rather than the matronly figure of the pre-war years. Hemlines rose and short hairstyles such as the “shingle”, “bob”, and “Eton crop” were popular. Etiquette was more relaxed than during the Victorian era, although appropriate dress was still expected for particular occasions; for work or leisure; city or country; “good” clothes and “house” clothes.

The low percentage of women in the workforce meant that a woman’s position in the society of the day was determined by the occupation or income of the man on whom she was dependent. Few married women worked and, unless they were deserted wives or widows, mothers stayed at home and looked after their children. The number of married women in paid employment remained virtually static from 1926 to 1936, at around three point five per cent of the female workforce. Single women generally lived with their parents until they
married, and remained under the influence of their parents and the protection of their fathers. They might have finished their education aged about twelve or thirteen; forced to find work to contribute to the family’s finances.

Until 1936, pupils at primary schools sat a test in standard six known as the proficiency examination. Those who passed were eligible for two years free education at a secondary school; those who failed could only go on to secondary education by paying fees. For many pupils this meant their education finished at primary school, when they were merely thirteen, sometimes even twelve. In 1936 free post primary education was made available to all pupils, but many parents could not afford to let their children take advantage of it. (Ebbett, 1981, p.36)

The effects of the 1930s economic depression revealed the vulnerable position that women were in. By the end of 1931, the number of registered unemployed was fifty-two thousand, and eighty-five. However, this figure did not include the number of women who were unemployed because they did not receive relief payments, even though women in employment had to contribute to the Unemployment Fund in 1931 –32 (Keith, 2001). There were no benefits available to women until the introduction of the Social Securities Bill, under a Labour Government, in 1939. Prior to this, in times of illness or unemployment, unmarried women or deserted wives, widows without children, and the permanently disabled, had to rely on the support of a male relative or a charitable institution.

The New Zealand of this era was a conservative country that closely associated itself with “Mother” England. New Zealand was granted autonomy to determine its Constitution and govern independently of the British Parliament by the Statute of Westminster in 1931. The Statute defined the dominions of the British Crown as:

…autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations. (cited in Keith, 2001, p.28)

Unlike dominions such as Canada and South Africa, who embraced this independence, New Zealand was not anxious to celebrate this freedom. In fact, it accepted the Statute only on
condition that it was not binding until accepted by Parliament. It was 1947 before Parliament was prepared to do so.

During the 1930s and 1940s the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* provided plenty of evidence of this allegiance to England. A regular column featured news “By Airmail From Ellie Bailey, London” (e.g. *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly*, 1 June 1939, p.19). The June 1939 issue also included an article, with photographs, featuring the stately homes of British monarchs. In 1941, “Over The Teacups” correspondent “Pohutu” wrote:

In a letter from Home I have just read how some of the girls hit upon the brilliant idea of tanning their bare legs with gravy browning… (*New Zealand Woman’s Weekly*, 4 December 1941, p.15)

The “Home” the correspondent was referring to was England, even though he or she may have been born in New Zealand. This emotional connection seems to have continued for many years. On a personal level, memories exist of a great-aunt referring to England as “Home” during the writer’s childhood in the 1950s and 60s, even though she had never been there.

Life in New Zealand was a serious business and it was reflected in the clothing of the times. New Zealand women of limited means generally wore their clothes until they were worn out. Few people had large wardrobes; many women managed with one dress for “best” and one or two for work, and all-encompassing aprons were universally worn (Ebbett, 1981, p.69). Clothes tended to be categorised into what was suitable for various age groups, and middle age was deemed to start around the mid-thirties. High fashion was generally for adventurous young women, if they could afford it, and the wealthy. The influence of the movie industry could be seen as women copied the “look”, in clothing, hairstyles and make-up, of actresses such as Greta Garbo, Bette Davis, and Ginger Rogers (Ebbett, 1981, pp.75-76).
The interviewed dressmakers who started work during the Depression years appear to have had little difficulty in getting employment, although one did remark that she went to work with her aunt, who was a dressmaker, because, “it was during the Depression years, just a little after, and jobs weren’t really easy (to get) and you did whatever came up” (JM, personal interview, June 2000). Another said that her first job was arranged by her aunt, (whom she lived with), who opposed her desire to enter teaching or office work “because men would look at her.” Hence, the aunt arranged a position with her own dressmaker.

The five interviewed dressmakers who entered the workforce during World War Two, also appear to have had little difficulty in finding positions in the dressmaking field, either as trainees in small dressmaking workrooms, (with eight to ten staff), or as dressmaking and tailoring apprentices. The majority started in these positions directly after leaving secondary school or college, aged around fifteen or sixteen. Only one went on to higher education to achieve a Homecraft Teacher’s Certificate, qualifying her to teach sewing in schools, although she also worked as a dressmaker from home for most of her working life.

5.2 COMPETITION; RETAIL, MAIL ORDER, AND MANUFACTURING

5.2.1 Retail Opportunities

The opportunity to buy goods from a shop existed in New Zealand even before the first colonists arrived. The Mission Store in KeriKeri, Bay of Islands, was established in 1820 to supply the basic needs of the three mission stations in the area. The Mission Store books record that Reverend Marsden’s daughter made the following purchases when she came to New Zealand with her father on his last visit in 1837:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 yds black silk to be dyed</td>
<td>10/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 straw bonnet to be altered</td>
<td>6/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 yd net for caps</td>
<td>3/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 prs slippers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 yds Irish linen</td>
<td>10/-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Also 24 yds black ribbon, 2 check silk neck handkerchiefs, darning cotton, papers of needles.
Total £4-1-0
( Drummond, 1967, p.135)

The arrival of colonists in the 1840s and 50s led to the establishment of shops. Originally, each settlement maintained a “store” to dispense supplies and rations to its settlers (Woodhouse, 1940, p.82). By 1842, Auckland had a milliner and two or three other stores. In 1850, Wellington even had stores where jewellery and white kid gloves were available (Godley, 1936, p.33). There is a record of the wedding of a young woman, who married in Christchurch in 1856, stating that her trousseau was a very simple affair chosen by her father, the Bishop, when on a visit to Wellington, the centre of fashion. He selected a white muslin dress with pink sprays, a black and white thin striped silk with blue silk flounces, and a brown barege fabric which was made up at home; her riding habit was made in Christchurch and she owned only one pair of shoes and one pair of boots. Her wedding gown was white silk and her bridesmaids wore white tarlatan and straw bonnets, all bought at a local general store, which also supplied the wedding ring (Woodhouse, 1940, pp.241-242).

When Englishwoman Charlotte Godley lived in New Zealand from 1850 to 1853, she wrote about going shopping one evening in Lyttelton, although she found it deplorable that the locals called it “going to the store.” She found Wellington more exciting because jewellery and white kid gloves were on offer, as well as more essential clothing. She noticed that the female population at least was well dressed “in the colonial style”, which she found too bright (Godley, quoted in Drummond, 1967, p.136).

Ten years earlier, Wellington shops had little clothing of any kind. The first issue of the New Zealand Gazette newspaper, in April 1840, had advertisements from about six small businesses, offering groceries, ironmongery, drinks, glassware, and guns. One offered
“wearing apparel from some of the first London houses”. Haberdashery and working clothes were also advertised (Drummond, 1967, p.136).

By the late 1850s:

New Zealand appeared to be the new El Dorado. While there was grim news of trouble between Maori and settlers in the far North, in Taranaki and near Auckland, the southern regions were experiencing growing prosperity. After the discovery of gold in Otago in 1861, massive immigration swelled the towns and cities of the South Island. These rapidly expanding population centres, although consisting almost entirely of men, were nonetheless a good prospect. In due course, men would settle and marry, build houses, and raise families; their homes would fill with women and children. And women at home would want fabrics for curtains and furnishings, table linen, dress lengths of silk, hats, lace trimming for their underwear and night attire, and of course baby clothes. Women needed drapers. (Millen, 2000, p.10)

Keith (2001, p.139) contends that:

By the end of the 19th century the introduction of refrigerated shipping had begun to restore the shaky New Zealand economy. Conditions were ideal for a boom in retailing. In every major city the department store became a prosperous institution. The first decades of the 20th century were its golden age...In the four main centres, if any class system could be said to exist it could be defined by patronage of department stores - for they ran the gamut from high society to cash-and-carry.

The fashion-conscious New Zealand woman was able to buy up-to-date imported costumes and locally manufactured copies at the better department stores such as Kirkcaldie and Stains in Wellington, Milne and Choyce Limited and Smith and Caughey Limited in Auckland, and J. Ballantyne and Company in Christchurch. It is interesting to consider the history of some of these department stores because they are so closely associated with the history of the establishment of dressmaking in this country.

5.2.1.1 The Establishment of the Major Department Stores

1863  Kirkcaldie and Stains Limited, Wellington

The business that is now Wellington’s largest department store, was opened in 1863 by two young male drapers who had emigrated from England and Scotland. They chose Wellington because colleagues in the drapery business had chosen the main South Island centres, and they felt they should go elsewhere. Wellington of 1863 had a population of five thousand and
supported several rival establishments to Kirkcaldie and Stains: three other drapers; a milliner/dressmaker; a milliner and fancy drapery; a tailor, and a bonnet-maker.

All stock was imported, initially from Sydney and later through agents appointed in Melbourne and London. Advertisements in the two local daily newspapers advised that the shop carried “all the latest designs in British and Foreign manufacture” (Millen, 2000, p.14). Divisions of the social classes were very distinct in 1860s’ Wellington, and Kirkcaldie and Stains’ advertisements were clearly aimed at fashionable ladies and gentlemen. They could not afford to be too exclusive however, because the money in the community could be found amongst the landowners, merchants, professionals, and the newly rich, such as squatters, traders, and gold-diggers (Millen, 2000, pp.18-19).

An efficient millinery and dressmaking department was crucial to the success of a drapery and, from early on, Kirkcaldies would have hired seamstresses and finishers, either to work in the store or to do outwork. (Millen, 2000, p.18)

By the 1880s, the store had eight separate departments: tailoring, dressmaking, gloves, mercery iii, haberdashery, mantles, millinery, and boots and shoes; all headed by men. Some of the merchandise, such as gloves, bonnets and parasols, was imported ready to sell. However, much of the imported stock consisted of bulk materials, such as textiles and laces, which were made up by large numbers of employees in the tailoring, dressmaking, and millinery workrooms upstairs, or by outworkers (Millen, 2000, pp.31-32). (See Images Sixteen and Seventeen, pp. 144 -145).

1867  Milne and Choyce Limited, Auckland iv

Sisters Jane and Charlotte Milne opened their small drapery store on a corner in downtown Auckland in 1867. Their stock included imported fabrics of all kinds, laces, buttons, crinolines, woollen shawls, and millinery. The name “Choyce” was added when one of the sisters married Henry Choyce around 1874. The Dressmaking Department was set up in 1875
and flourished as the main producer of apparel for the store for twenty-five years, until ready
to wear garments gained in acceptability and popularity (Tucker, 1968, p.29).

By 1880, the business could claim to be a department store, with separate departments for
millinery, jackets and mantles, gloves, silk, underclothing, and babywear. They advertised in
1883 that the Dressmaking Department was, “now under the management of a first-class
costumier from Worths of Paris” (Tucker, 1968, p.31). By 1902, their workrooms making
garments and millinery employed a hundred people and the shop had increased to four stories
in height and covered over fourteen thousand square feet. A number of special services were
offered to customers, including the offer to send a dressmaker to the houses of those in
mourning, to arrange the ordering of mourning costume in the privacy of the home (Tucker,
1968, p.36).

The Dressmaking Department was maintained in their inner city store until 1950, when it was
demed to be more economical to develop the space into a retail area. Garments continued to
be manufactured in a clothing factory purchased in a nearby suburb. The business closed in
the late 1960s. (See Image Eighteen, p. 146).

1872 J. Ballantyne and Company, Christchurch

In Christchurch, drapers and clothiers J. Ballantyne and Company set up in business in 1872,
although the company developed from a business that had been started originally in 1854.
Ballantynes imported fashionable costumes from Britain and Europe, selected by staff based
in London. Their Christchurch store featured showrooms on the ground floor and
dressmaking and tailoring departments upstairs. John Ballantyne, the founder, took his three
sons into the business, and it remains in family ownership today (Smith, 1998, p.7).
Early in 1880, Marianne Smith (nee Caughey) opened a small drapery business in downtown Auckland. She and her husband were immigrants from Northern Ireland. Her husband and her brother Andrew joined her in the business in 1882. Their background as experienced drapers served them well in a city that presented increasing competition, as more and more imported goods flooded in. Andrew Caughey strove to widen their customer base by travelling widely north and south of Auckland, carrying stock and samples on a packhorse (Caughey, 1980, pp.3-6). From 1885 onwards, Smith and Caugheys retained agents in London to buy for them. From the early 1900s, the store’s buyers were sent every year to select goods from British and European markets. Descendents of the original owners still retain ownership of the business. (See Image Nineteen, p.147).

“The Farmers’”, as it was affectionately known, was started by a young commercial traveller called Laidlaw Leeds. Influenced by the success of the American Montgomery Ward mail order catalogues, he established a business in Auckland to sell all kinds of merchandise solely by mail order. His method of selling was phenomenally successful, and clothing and drapery were included as part of the merchandise from the very start. The business experienced rapid growth both before and after Leeds sold it in 1918. In 1919, the company purchased twelve rural stores and ventured into retail. By 1924, the number of stores had increased to fifty-three small department stores, although the company still sold direct from Auckland by catalogue to its fifty thousand customers from all over New Zealand. The potential to increase the chain store business was made possible by the improvement in rural roads and the increasing ownership of motorcars by rural dwellers (Kay, 1953, pp.134-137).
The Farmers’ opened a clothing manufacturing plant in suburban Auckland in 1950, producing women’s dresses, beachwear, skirts, trousers and blouses for all their branches.

Another dress manufacturing operation was opened in Auckland city, adjacent to their flagship store, in 1952. The mail order catalogue was discontinued in 1939, primarily due to the difficulties in securing stock and offering guaranteed prices during the World War Two (Kay, 1953, p.234).

Wolfe (2001, pp.83-84) reports that:

In the late 1930s, an obvious place to buy clothing on a budget was the Auckland Farmers’ Trading Co. Country customers were guaranteed safe delivery to anywhere in New Zealand and “all the South Sea Islands.” Size gave the “Dominion’s largest warehouse” buying power, so certain lines were the cheapest in the city, if not the country…Alternatively, careful shoppers could stock their wardrobes at the national department store chains of McKenzies, Woolworths, Hallensteins, Warnocks, and the DIC.

The Farmers’ Trading Company continued to produce catalogues to promote the stock at its major retail outlet (see Images Twenty and Twenty-One, pp. 148 -149).

When the interviewed dressmakers were asked what opportunities existed in their city or town for clients to buy retail clothing, well over half insisted that there were plenty of opportunities. The following are some examples of responses, and represent a range of locations from small rural towns to the main cities:

Plenty of well-established family stores. (DL, mid North Island, personal interview, June 2000)
Yes. I don’t know how many drapers shops there were - three or four I suppose; and they sold fabrics, women’s clothes, underwear; like a small department store. (JM, lower North Island, personal interview, June 2000)
On reflection we had far more fashion stores and drapery stores than we have now; they were really great, and you could buy all your needs at one store. (MP, mid to lower North Island, personal interview, July 2000)
Yes, there were. There were beautiful shops in Tauranga (mid North Island - East Coast). (ML, personal interview, September 2000)
Oh yes, there was quite a variety in Morrinsville (North Island - south of Auckland). (IG, personal interview, March 2002)

Certainly, MH’s account of the retail opportunities available in 1950s and 1960s Gisborne describes a retail environment that would have been typical of many similar small to medium-sized New Zealand towns that also catered to a strong rural community:
Oh plenty. There were some really lovely dress shops in Gisborne. There was Petties, which was quite a big department store and they had a lovely fashion floor upstairs. There was Lucy Mays, which had really high class clothes, beautiful clothes, one-offs. Jean Allens was another very smart dress shop. Common Sheltons was another semi-department, farming-type store which had a clothing department. Rosies, which was clothes. Adairs, which was a fabric shop as well as clothes. Melbourne Cash - fabrics and clothes. McGruers, which was everyday things. Cash Doors - also more everyday things. They had really smart clothes in Gisborne; I think with all the big stations around the area and the farming community. I mean, there were the races and that. And there were lovely hat shops; beautiful hat shops: one up by the town clock, one in Peel Street, and one down opposite Petties. People wore hats to the races and into town. We used to go to town every Friday; two aunties and I. We used to go to town every Friday morning and we’d be all dressed up with our hats and gloves on. We used to go looking around the different shops and buy our buttons and zips and things. A couple of times the manager of Cash Doors told us how smart we looked and what a pleasure it was to see us coming into the shop. You never went to the races or a wedding without a new hat and your gloves and handbag and shoes; everything to match your outfit. (MH, personal interview, February 2000)

5.2.2 Mail Order Opportunities

For nineteenth and early twentieth century New Zealand women living outside the major cities, mail order catalogues were indispensable. According to Caughey (1980, p.7), Auckland retailers Smith and Caughey produced a catalogue, and there is mention of buying trips to Britain, resulting “in regular direct imports as advertised in (the) 1888 catalogue”, and the assertion that mail orders “had always been a large part of the business, but increased considerably with the introduction of the world’s first penny postage in 1901. By 1912 about fifty thousand orders came annually from country clients” (Caughey, 1980, p.10).

One of the most successful mail order businesses ever operated in New Zealand would surely have been that of the Farmers’ Trading Company. Modelled on famous American mail order companies such as Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward, the Farmers (then Laidlaw Leeds), offered an illustrated catalogue from 1909. Leeds aimed the catalogue at the rural community, at a time when country roads in most areas could only be reliably covered on horseback. The first catalogue consisted of a hundred and eighteen pages and five thousand copies were issued; by 1913, the catalogue had increased to four hundred and forty pages and forty-five thousand issues (Kay, 1953, p.74). Drapery and clothing were two departments that grew rapidly, from forty-four pages in the 1910 catalogue to a hundred and four in the 1915
edition (Kay, 1953, p.34). Production of the catalogue continued until 1939, long after the business had expanded into retail. By this time, most rural communities were served by good roads, and members of these communities could travel to the nearest town to purchase their requirements. The advent of war also impacted on the ability of the business to guarantee stocks of goods, at the advertised prices, and there were difficulties with printing and publishing catalogues of such size in wartime (Kay, 1953, p.234).

When the interviewed dressmakers were asked if they had been aware of any mail order catalogues or mail order opportunities that were available at the time that they were in business, their responses were universally “no” or “not really”. On elaboration, five of them tentatively suggested that there might have been a Farmers’ catalogue. For example:

No, I can’t think of any…maybe the Farmers’. I can’t say I ever saw one. (MH, personal interview, February 2000)
I don’t remember there being any. Farmers’ Trading Company - they were Laidlaw Leeds to begin with - they would send a catalogue twice a year I think, to people on their mailing list. But that’s the only one I know of. (JM, personal interview, June 2000)
I doubt it. Unless…there was a Farmers catalogue. I don’t know when that stopped. (VD, personal interview, July 2000)

One dressmaker remembered imported dress catalogues:

They were around and came mainly from America. From time to time I would see one of these beautifully-produced catalogues where all these super looking but rather similar clothes were promoted and, on occasions, I was asked to copy them. The photographic illustrations always had the garments filled so superbly and, many times, the client was not of similar size or shape. (ZP, personal interview, July 2000)

Another dressmaker could remember mail order as an avenue for purchasing dress fabrics:

No, I don’t remember clothing. I know that there was a place in Auckland, in later years, (that) used to send materials…used to send a small amount that would make a frock or a suit. You could choose and keep some and send the rest back, and you’d just send the money (for what was kept). (DS, personal interview, November 1999)

5.2.3 Manufacturing Opportunities

Before the late 1980s most clothing worn by New Zealanders was made in New Zealand. Restriction of import licences and tariffs applied to imported clothing protected New
Zealand-made clothing by ensuring its dominance in the marketplace and its competitive price. After World War Two manufacturers wanted the government to lift restrictions that made the fashioning of higher-priced and individual garments uneconomic, and wanted more overseas designs to be allowed into the country for copying. ‘A hangover from war days, these measures had been designed to encourage mass production and eliminate all elaborate trimmings, but they were now thwarting the course of fashion in New Zealand’ (Wolfe, 2001, p.13).

Clothing manufacturing companies operated in most small and large towns in New Zealand and the industry was a foremost employer of women. According to the Population Census of 1945, seventeen thousand, one hundred and eighty-two women were employed in the manufacture of wearing apparel; increasing to nineteen thousand, three hundred and twenty-three by the 1956 Census. Over the same time period, between two thousand, three hundred and three hundred and three thousand, three hundred males were employed in the industry (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1953, p. 526).

The country sustained seven hundred and fifty clothing factories in 1949-50 and eight hundred and twenty-seven in 1950-51 (ibid, p.552). The number of factories remained at around seven hundred throughout the 1960s (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1970, p. 517). The geographical distribution of companies had remained consistent for some time, with a concentration of factories (manufacturing footwear, other wearing apparel, and made-up textile goods) in Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury and Otago, around the main centres of population. This type of manufacturing was represented in most of the smaller regions too; with areas such as Hawkes Bay sustaining twenty factories; forty-two in South Auckland – Bay of Plenty; and sixteen factories in Taranaki, in 1967-68 (New Zealand Official Yearbook,
1960, p.606; New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1970, pp.487-488). The 1976-77 Census of Manufacturing records that eighteen thousand, four hundred and forty-three females and three thousand and twenty-nine males were employed in seven hundred and twenty-one clothing establishments at that time (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1980, p.450). By 1989, manufacturers of textiles, leather and apparel were still significant employers of people in the manufacturing sector in the main centres and in the regions. The effects of de-regulation would become apparent in the 1990s (referred to in 8.3).

Eight of the interviewed dressmakers completed formal apprenticeships in clothing or tailoring manufacturing units. In almost all cases, the companies they worked in were small, employing from two to twenty people. One of the dressmakers worked for Bendon Industries Limited, intermittently over a four year period, both in their factory and as an outworker. She said that she found factory work too repetitive and preferred working at home (IG, personal interview, March 2002). IG and JSM were the only dressmakers of the interviewed group who had experience of working in a large clothing factory. JSM served her apprenticeship with Austin Brown Limited, an example of a medium-sized company that manufactured women’s outerwear, and also briefly worked in the sample room of Lane, Walker, Rudkin, a large company in Christchurch.

Large companies produced workwear, casual clothing, underwear and nightwear, such as Deane Apparel Limited and Canterbury Apparel Limited in Christchurch, and Sew Hoy Limited in Dunedin. Bendon Industries Limited, a very successful underwear manufacturer, was established in 1947 and is still operating. Tailored menswear manufacturing was dominated by companies such as Rembrandt Suits Limited and A. Levy Limited in Wellington, and Cambridge Suits Limited in Auckland.
Some retail traders, including Farmers’ Trading Company (see 5.2.1), maintained their own clothing factories to produce garments for their chain of retail stores. Independent companies, such as M. Zemba Limited in Wanganui, mass-produced garments under contract to Farmers’. These garments, including women’s blouses, nightwear, girls’ dresses and blouses, and boys’ shirts and shorts, had to be designed and made to meet a particular price point and details such as the number of buttons or the fullness of a skirt were critical. M. Zemba Limited had a total staff of approximately one hundred and a design team of four in the early 1980s. The factory hummed with row upon row of industrial machines.

Large fashion manufacturing companies also existed, manufacturing under their own labels, for example; Love Story Limited, Peppertree Fashions Limited, and Figgins Fashions Limited. They were involved in production sometimes for their own retail outlets, but they more commonly wholesaled their ranges, employing travelling sales representatives to sell to retailers. Corporate wear became popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s; Thornton Hall Limited, manufacturer of fashion apparel, is an example of a company who diversified into corporate apparel at this time.

The *New Zealand Apparel Buyers Guide* of 1986 listed twenty-five companies that manufactured blouses; forty-seven companies that made dresses for women and girls; thirty-five companies involved in the production of cocktail and evening dresses; and twenty-one companies that manufactured swimwear, demonstrating significant investment in the manufacture of womenswear (New Zealand Apparel Buyers Guide, 1986, pp.35-43). As at February 1987, New Zealand had one thousand, six hundred and nineteen companies producing apparel and footwear and employing a total of nearly twenty-seven thousand people. Forty-three of these companies had over one hundred employees; eight hundred and
thirty-four companies had up to five employees (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1988-89, p.607). The above figures illustrate the extent of the industry’s involvement in on-shore manufacturing immediately prior to de-regulation that commenced with the Tariff Act of 1988, discussed in greater depth in 8.3.

5.3 RESOURCES

5.3.1 Textiles

Throughout the nineteenth century, all dress textiles available in New Zealand were imported by warehousemen, drapers and department stores. It was not unusual for these businesses to place advertisements in newspapers listing the textiles that had landed in various shipments (see Image Twenty-Two, p. 150). Advertisements often referred to “dresses”, in reality these were not made-up dresses but pieces of fabric of a suitable length to make a dress.

Even though New Zealand had developed a substantial trade in wool, it was not processed locally to make dress textiles and, in fact, was of too coarse a grade to be suitable for doing so. Apparel textiles were imported from Britain and this continued to be the source into the twentieth century. Judson records that, up to and during the 1950s:

Great Britain was given preferential treatment when it came to importation of goods into the country, both generally and in clothing in textiles. This preference, and the prevailing “motherland” attitude are reflected in the origin of yarns, fabrics and clothing. This British preference biased all external influences on New Zealand’s fashion over this time period towards British fashions. Yarns and fabrics were almost exclusively sourced locally or from the UK. However, the dominance of Great Britain, particularly as a source of fabrics, was declining through the decade. Fabric imports were coming increasingly from the United States of America and Asia by 1959, although Great Britain still exceeded all other import origins combined (Judson, 1999, p.24).

Towards the end of World War Two, shortages of suitable fabric contributed to a shortage of new clothing for men returning to civilian life. Obtaining a good suit was particularly difficult and two pricing structures applied; a more expensive suit made from imported fabric and a cheaper suit made of a “good New Zealand material” (Sullivan, Minister of Supply, quoted in Taylor, 1986, p.846). Taylor observes that the, “good New Zealand material” was
viewed less enthusiastically by retailers. Their spokesman, at the end of August 1944, said that local mills normally made only 50% of New Zealand’s worsteds, and the Services were still taking much of them. Some worsted was being imported from Australia, but not nearly enough to meet demand, and an “emergency cloth” had been made locally. Approximately three hundred thousand yards of this tweedy material were being used to make suits, overcoats, flannel trousers, sports coats, work trousers, women’s coats and gym frocks. Experience had shown that the material was unsuitable for men’s suits, girls’ gym frocks and sports coats, though it had partly filled the gap regarding overcoats and shorts. Meanwhile there were occasional encouraging advertisements; “English suiting - just arrived - a range of the latest blue tonings in worsted fabrics. Hugh Wright’s provide the experienced styling and perfect fitting of a suit to your individual measurements. For four years we have wanted to make an offer like this” (Taylor, 1986, p.847).

By the early 1960s, New Zealand was the second greatest wool producing country in the world. A huge proportion of the wool clip was exported but, in New Zealand, “there were now 13 major woollen mills supplying raw material to 80 knitting mills, which employed nearly 4400 New Zealanders” (Wolfe, 2001, p.75). Alliance Textiles (1881 to 1980) is an example of a mill that produced wool yarn for hand and commercial knitting, and for weaving into woollen and worsted cloths.

The Alliance Textiles Group had begun with the establishment of the Oamaru Woollen Factory Company in 1881, and (by the 1980s had) purchased, among other things, the woollen and worsted mill operations from Prestige / Holeproof. It also had mill operations at Mosgiel, Milton, Oamaru and Timaru (Wolfe, 2001, p.80).

The aforementioned Holeproof Industries Limited was based in Auckland, and operated what was known as a total vertical operation from the 1930s. Their production process:

began with the buying in of dirty wool, which was then successively scoured, spun, dyed, woven and made into garments. The nerve centre of the operation was the laboratory, essential to understanding the new fibres and determining their suitability for use. Carding, scouring and spinning machines converted wool into yarn for Holeproof’s own weaving divisions, as well as other mills throughout the country.
new automatic loom produced nearly 20km of woven cloth per year, most of which was destined to become men’s and ladies’ outerwear and boys’ school shorts (Wolfe, 2001, p.78).

The company also manufactured socks and nylon stockings and maintained branch factories outside Auckland producing womenswear and swimwear. It was a clothing industry leader by the late 1940s and, by 1960, had a staff of over a thousand people.

Women’s magazines of the 1940s and 50s regularly featured advertisements for textiles, frequently referred to by brand, possibly to develop and maintain brand loyalty through the war years, when many textiles were scarce. For example, *Mirror* magazine advertised “Moygashel; pure linens, spun rayons, and wool mixtures” (*Mirror*, August 1949, p.68), and mentioned that the New Zealand agents were “Dawson and Maudsley Ltd”. The September 1949 issue advertised “Tootal Fabrics” (*Mirror*, p.68). The *New Zealand Home Journal* carried an advertisement for “William Hollins and Co. Ltd, Nottingham”, the manufacturers of “Viyella” and “Clydella”. “H. Pettit” is mentioned as the New Zealand agent. In a message to their customers, the company says that over the previous few months they had received supplies of the fabrics from overseas and had distributed them throughout New Zealand.

That these supplies have not been equal to meet the demand we are fully aware; also we regret that in these days it is never possible, owing to War regulations, to advise our customers ahead of the date of arrival (*New Zealand Home Journal*, 10 June 1943, p.12).

One of the main factors that differentiated the apparel that dressmakers produced from that produced in mass manufacturing or by designers, was that the dressmakers’ clients generally supplied their own fabric. Invariably it was purchased at retail shops, and patterns and haberdashery may have been purchased at the same time. The interviewed dressmakers recollect working with a very broad range of fabrics, with predominantly natural fibres, particularly wool, but including cotton, linen, and some silks. Taffeta, satin, crepe, brocade
and laces were popular for evening and bridal garments. From the 1940s and 50s, nylon and polyester fabrics were also used. The dressmakers also confirmed that it was very rare for their clients not to supply their own fabrics. Only one dressmaker stocked a limited range of very basic fabrics that clients could select from, and another said that only very occasionally had she ever bought fabric for a client because, “they couldn’t get out and they said they wanted just a cotton to make a blouse” (AM, personal interview, March 2000). It was not uncommon for the dressmakers to purchase linings and interfacings for garments, however.

5.3.2 Haberdashery

The practice of dressmaking requires access to stocks of consumable materials such as thread, zips, buttons, lining fabrics, interfacing fabrics, elastic, braids and trimmings. The dressmaker also utilises scissors, cutting shears, pins, tape measures, tailors’ chalk, and other items that do not need to be purchased for the making of each new garment, but do need to be replenished or replaced from time to time. The source of these items, for the interviewed dressmakers, was the local retailer; a drapery, a department store, or a sewing machine shop. Three of the dressmakers remember representatives from a warehouse (possibly Sargood, Son and Ewan), and from a sewing thread company (English Sewing Limited), calling on them during the periods of time that they operated from business premises. However, they still purchased many items from local retailers.

5.3.3 Equipment

“In the 1950s,” reports Wolfe (2001, p.76), “it was desirable for every home to have a sewing room, to house the electric or older treadle machine.” Sewing classes had been part of the school curriculum for girls for several decades, and the hire purchase terms offered by many stores made it possible for many homes to have a sewing machine.
The interviewed dressmakers generally worked with domestic machines and by far the most common brand that they used, or at least started out with, was Singer. In two instances, husbands put motors on to Singer treadle machines when their houses were connected to electric power. Five dressmakers eventually graduated to a Bernina domestic machine (the second most popular brand), that they described as being “heavy grade” or “light industrial” or “semi-commercial.” Seven dressmakers had industrial machines, but they also retained a domestic machine for operations such as making buttonholes and decorative stitching. Seven dressmakers reported buying a domestic overlocker when overlockers became available. The majority of machines were purchased from local retailers, such as the Singer agent or Bernina agent, although one dressmaker bought her industrial machine from a factory when it was replacing older machines with new models.

Only one of the dressmakers mentioned owning any specialised pressing equipment other than an ordinary domestic iron, a Bernina steam press. Most of the women cut out the work on the dining room table or on the floor. Seven said that they later had a dedicated cutting table, but not when they first started out or only when they worked from commercial premises. Only five dressmakers spoke of working with a tailors’ dummy, but the group were not questioned specifically about this, so this was volunteered information and may have been true of others in the group too.

5.3.4 Patterns

By the 1940s, and the start of the period that represents the main focus of this study, the major paper pattern companies had been in business for up to eighty years. Butterick began in 1863; McCall’s in 1870; Vogue in 1899; and Simplicity in 1927. The first patterns were made of thin tissue paper with indicators for grainlines, notches and placement details cut out of the
pattern pieces in a series of holes. Pattern envelopes and instruction sheets were not standard until the 1890s and 1919 respectively. McCall’s patented the printed pattern in 1919 and held the patent until 1938. The other major pattern companies immediately began producing printed patterns, apart from Vogue, which continued with the unprinted version for a few years. The practice of offering patterns featuring the licensed designs of top French couturiers began in the 1920s and included designers such as Chanel, Vionnet, Worth and Poiret (Emery in Burman, 1999, pp.239-247). (See Image Twenty-Three, p. 151).

Judson (1999, p.14) reports that the brands of paper patterns available in New Zealand in the 1950s included, “Vogue, Simplicity, McCall’s (all from the United States of America), Weldons (Britain), Wiegels (Melbourne, Australia), Academy (Auckland) and Paragon (Dunedin),” and notes that the patterns could be bought in fabric stores and department stores that sold fabric. She also notes that women’s magazines often ran pattern services which offered free or easily accessible patterns, and that an Australian publication, the Enid Gilchrist pattern books were popular. “Home dressmakers who had some confidence in their skills could draft off the patterns in these and use them” (Judson, 1999, p.14). The New Zealand Woman’s Weekly invited readers to send away for a free pattern from 1940 to 1955. The service was discontinued in 1955 but re-introduced in 1959 with a small charge for each pattern (see Images Twenty-Four and Twenty-Five, pp. 152 – 153).

Of the eighteen dressmakers interviewed, two consistently used commercial patterns brought to them by clients, and eleven worked with a blend of commercial patterns and their own adaptation skills, to achieve the look that the client wanted. The client generally provided the dressmaker with a picture of the garment and the dressmaker would buy a pattern, or use one from her existing stock, that enabled her to get most directly to that garment; adding to and
adapting it to create the required design. Five dressmakers made their own patterns, but still for an idea or design that the client had provided. Ten of the dressmakers had learned pattern drafting as part of their apprenticeships or had gone to pattern drafting classes.

The findings above demonstrate a significant factor that differentiates dressmakers from designers. The dressmakers were not generally involved in the generation of new and innovative ideas. Their task was to reproduce, as competently as they were able, the ideas and designs of others, to fit the measurements of their individual clients. Their design aspirations appear to have been satisfied by customising an existing design to suit the desires of their client and by working within the constraints imposed perhaps by the client’s body shape and fabric selection.

5.3.5 Magazines

New Zealand women could enjoy a wide selection of magazines during the period of the study. Locally produced *Eve; Mirror; New Zealand Home Journal; New Zealand Woman; Woman’s Choice; Thursday;* and the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly*, all featured sections on fashion. Australian publications such as the *Australian Woman’s Weekly* and *Australian Home Journal*, and British magazines such as *My Home; Woman and Home;* and the *English Woman’s Weekly* were also available. The dressmakers also recall buying fashion magazines; for example, *Vogue; L’Officiel; Vanity Fair; Marie Claire*, and specialist bridal publications. Very few of the dressmakers subscribed to a publication and only six mentioned buying fashion magazines occasionally. When questioning the group about this area, the impression gained was that they were more interested in crafting beautiful garments than in fashion per se. Generally, they did not seem to feel that it was
part of their role to stay abreast of fashion; rather it was their role to interpret current
fashion.

5.4 EDUCATION AND TRAINING
All of the interviewed dressmakers, apart from one who was born in England and did not
emigrate until she was twenty-two, attended New Zealand schools during a period when
sewing classes were a compulsory inclusion in the curriculum for girls. Dressmaker MH
recalled the sewing classes that were part of her education at Intermediate School, attended
between primary and secondary school (high school or college) when the pupils were aged
around eleven to twelve years.

The first garment I made where I learned to sew, I suppose, was at the Intermediate School. We used to
have sewing classes. We used to do all the different seams; made the usual blouse and (seam) sampler
(MH, personal interview, February 2000).

School sewing programmes included mastering a range of hand stitches, such as running
stitch, hemming and herringbone stitch; and a range of seams mastered on a machine. The
intermediate school stage focussed strongly on sewing, for its female students, with
dedicated sewing rooms that contained electric domestic machines, domestic irons, and
tables large enough to allow fabric to be laid out and cut. Seam samplers allowed students
the opportunity to develop, and retain as examples, seam techniques such as a standard flat
seam, French seams, and flat-felled seams. Simple garments were attempted, generally
from commercial patterns, such as a sleeveless blouse or a gathered skirt with a waistband.
These garments often incorporated commonplace sewing techniques such as zip insertion;
the addition of buttons and buttonholes; the making of plackets; and the attachment of a
collar (ZP, personal communication, July 2000; MH, personal communication; February
2000).
Technical High Schools, as they were called, provided subjects such as homecraft and sewing, from the time that the first one opened in 1905 (Wolfe, 1999, p.17). Ebbett records that during the 1930s, the decade when some of the older dressmakers were at school, not a great deal of emphasis was placed on preparing girls for long-term employment. Generally, employment was seen as a short-term stage that bridged the gap between leaving school and getting married. From 1936, free post-primary education was available to all students, but many parents in these depressed economic times, could not afford to keep their children in school. If a choice had to be made, it was invariably that the girls, at the age of twelve or thirteen, left school and went to work. The school leaving age was not raised to fifteen until 1944 (Ebbett, 1981, p.36). The pursuit of higher qualifications and a career in the professions was also not encouraged for most young women in the 1940s and 1950s. War interrupted the education of some, and the ideal of a post-war secure domestic life, with a nice well-run home, a husband who was a good provider, and the responsibility for raising their children, was the predominant option presented to women. Several of the dressmakers interviewed made similar comments that when they left school, “you just didn’t go to university - you got a job, got married, had kids, and that was it.”

Two of the dressmakers in this study left school at the age of thirteen; eight at the age of fifteen and, for the balance, their exact leaving age was not specified. Therefore, the impression gained is that they left school around the age of fifteen or sixteen.\textsuperscript{xii}

Dressmaker CM said of leaving school at thirteen:

\begin{quote}
My Dad was ill and he … it wasn’t like today where you are given pensions and things like that. He was sick more often than not, so my mother felt that she wouldn’t have enough to buy my uniform, and so she had to take me to the Department of Labour (for permission to leave school) so that I could go to work … because I left school so young, I had to go to night school for three years. That was part of (the requirement of the Department of Labour), and that was when it was Seddon Memorial Technical College, and so that’s where I learned patternmaking. We had not only to do the dressmaking part, but also had to take English, Arithmetic as we called it, and Spelling (CM, personal interview, July 2001).
\end{quote}
Only one dressmaker went on to higher education, to gain a Homecraft Teachers Certificate. Several dressmakers said that they had learned dressmaking at school and enjoyed the subject. Six went on to do three and four year apprenticeships. Eight went on to work for other dressmakers or in small workrooms or factories initially. Two started their employment in other fields and started dressmaking later, and one went straight into business on her own. Mothers and other female relatives were often instrumental in teaching the dressmakers their earliest sewing skills.

Certainly throughout the 1940s and 1950s, there were many avenues through which women and girls could learn dressmaking. Women’s magazines regularly carried advertisements for dressmaking colleges, courses, and other aids to assist dressmaking practice. The McCabe Academy of Dressmaking and Millinery gave the assurance that it could teach a student to become a competent dressmaker by post, the same “thorough, modern methods” that their students learned in their personal attendance courses at their London and New Zealand schools. “You can make plenty of lovely clothes for yourself…and you will have a profession at your fingertips which is as good as money in the bank” (New Zealand Woman’s Weekly, 1 June 1939, p.44). The Druleigh College of Dressmaking made the claim in an advertisement that, “if you want to make your own clothes with a professional finish; if you want to take up Dressmaking and Designing as a career - Druleigh Home Study instruction is the easy, practical way” (New Zealand Woman’s Weekly, 30 March 1950, p.32). Image Twenty-Six (p. 154) shows the cover of the Druleigh Book of Patterncutting.

Two of the dressmakers interviewed attended courses, primarily in patternmaking, at a Druleigh College in Auckland, and a third at the Hollywood School of Dressmaking in
Gisborne. Other dressmakers confirmed that patternmaking courses were also available at the technical colleges and through correspondence classes.

5.5 BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

None of the interviewed dressmakers sought or received professional advice on setting up a business. In the vast majority of cases, their businesses were home-based enterprises that evolved gradually. When asked if they had paid tax on their earnings, seven dressmakers said that they did, nine said that they did not, and two declined to answer the question. When asked if they felt that their clients regarded their business as a professional business, the response from the majority of dressmakers was positive. Four dressmakers made comments that indicated that some clients thought that the work should be done for nothing or at a cheap rate for a “friend”. Also, some friends did not appreciate that the dressmaker was working, and expected her to stop when they called into the home. Several commented that when they adopted a professional attitude, eventually this was how they were perceived.

Employment organisations that existed for working women from after World War Two until the 1970s, were generally involved in the fight for women to gain equal pay when doing the same work as men. No evidence can be found of women’s employment or mentoring organisations that would have benefited the dressmakers during the period of their practice.

As New Zealand entered the twentieth century, its geographical and sociological development became increasingly urbanised and industrially progressive. The family unit assumed great importance and a differentiation between home and work occurred. Men generally were now
engaged in income earning employment away from the house, and women were responsible for the home and family. The strong emphasis placed on the importance of home and family encouraged the application of domestic pursuits and most women had some sewing abilities, learned at school or from other family members. Thrift in the home was encouraged and was a philosophy that had had its origins in the deprivations of the depression years. Generally speaking, women were adept at extending the family budget by applying homecraft-based solutions wherever possible, including in the provision of clothing. This was a pattern of life that was maintained until the 1960s, interrupted only, and in significant measure, by the advent of World War Two. Prior to the war, few married women worked outside the home. Single women worked in significant numbers in shops, offices, clothing manufacturing and, in waning numbers, in domestic service. They generally ceased employment when they married. The effects of the war on the employment of women are considered in greater depth in the following chapter.

There was still a strong emotional attachment to the United Kingdom and this was reflected in preference for it, and reliance upon it, as an import / export market. Department stores, textile importers, and warehousemen frequently obtained stock from this source. This strong allegiance was clearly demonstrated when New Zealand rapidly followed Britain into war with Germany in 1939. Evidence suggests that the material needs of the dressmakers were well catered for by local shops, department stores and some mail order channels. Opportunities for training in specific skills were improving but little assistance was available for business development. The infrastructure that was in place during the first four decades of the twentieth century was to be severely tested by the advent of World War Two. The impact of the six year war, and its ongoing repercussions, were to have a significant effect on the production of clothing in New Zealand and on those whose incomes were associated with this
industry. The challenges of living and working under wartime conditions will be examined more closely in Chapter Six.

NOTES

i Olssen (1980) records that women made up only 20.7% of the workforce.

ii Millen (2000) was commissioned by Kirkcaldies and Stains Ltd in 1996 to write a history of the store and had full access to company records.

iii The mercery department sold textile fabrics.

iv Tucker (1968) also had access to company records to write a history of Milne and Choyce Ltd.

v Smith (1998) has developed a history of several early Christchurch businesses, included in a publication for Canterbury Museum. Eldred-Grigge (1993) also documents the history of Ballantynes in his text about the company’s 1947 fire.

vi The history of Smith and Caughey Ltd, documenting its first one hundred years, was written by a member of the Caughey family (Caughey, 1980).

vii Kay (1953) worked in management positions in the Farmers’ Trading Company for many years and had access to company records to refer to when writing this account of the company’s early history.

viii Import restrictions were imposed from 1938 (Laurenson, 2005, p.57).


x For example; 13.6% in Auckland; 18.6% in Canterbury; 16.6% in North Otago; and 9% in Hawkes Bay, and 6.8% in Taranaki (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1990, pp.508-509).

xi Several companies appeared in more than one category, as they manufactured a range of garment types.

xii Fry in Else (1993, p. 351) records that, in the late nineteenth century, “Most saw primary education for both girls and boys as the government’s responsibility; secondary education was a luxury for which parents were generally expected to pay … This privilege was initially offered to boys more readily than to girls. The acceptance that secondary education could benefit all came only slowly. Legislation introduced in 1903 provided for free places at secondary school for all who passed the Proficiency examination, but those eligible did not always take up their places. The reasons varied: their help was needed at home, it was still a financial burden, or their parents were not convinced of the value of more years at school … Proficiency was abolished in 1936, and it gradually became common practice to go on to secondary school. Various influences then combined to maintain so-called ‘girls’ subjects’ and keep down the number of girls taking what were perceived as ‘boys’ subjects’, thus channelling girls towards a limited range of occupations.”

xiii Post-secondary school qualifications concerned with the fields of food, nutrition, clothing and textiles, included home science and home economics certificates and diplomas. The School of Home Science was founded at Otago University in 1911, and the Association of Home Science Alumnae, established in 1921, existed until 1990, “to keep home science graduates in touch with one another; to keep them aware of developments in the fields of nutrition, foods, clothing, textiles and design; to assist in recruiting students to home science courses; and to raise funds when the need arose” (Malthus in Else, 1993, p. 359).

xiv New Zealand Woman’s Weekly (1 June 1339, p.44), advertisement for the McCabe Academy of Dressmaking and Millinery in Auckland and Wellington. New Zealand Woman’s Weekly (30 March 1950, p.32), advertisement for the Druleigh College of Dressmaking, Auckland. Woman’s Choice (September 1954, p.54), advertisement for a book entitled Perfect Dresscutting By Tape Measure Made Easier, author, Adrienne Douglas. New Zealand Woman’s Weekly (5 May 1958, p.25), advertisement for Ross Hynes Dressmaker, advertising a “Home Dressmaking Course” for twenty shillings. The advertisement claims that it is a famous Australian course and that Hynes is a dressmaking tutor of international repute.
Image Sixteen:  Waterloo House, the premises of department store Kirkcaldie and Stains from 1864 to 1868 (Millen, 2000, p. 16).
Image Seventeen: The drapery and millinery departments of Kirkcaldie and Stains in 1897 (Millen, 2000, p. 53).
Misses Milne respectfully announce …

‘By always keeping a carefully-selected stock

supplying a good article and executing with taste, neatness and despatch, all orders with which they may be favoured,

Misses Milne hope to meet with a fair share of support’

Image Nineteen: An 1884 photograph of the Smith and Caughey department store in Queen Street, Auckland, plus a copy of one of the store’s advertisements, published in an issue of the New Zealand Herald in the same year (Caughey, 1980, p. 6).
Image Twenty: The cover of the September 1947 issue of Town Talk, a catalogue supplied by Farmers’ Trading Company to its customers.
Image Twenty-One: The October 1947 issue of Town Talk, the Farmers’ Trading Company catalogue.
Image Twenty-Three: The cover of a 1950s Vogue pattern for a couturier garment produced under licence. This one does not name the couturier, although it was common to do so.
A Stitch magazine advertisement for its mail order pattern service; in this instance, for 1950s ball gowns (Stitch, June 1955, p. 28).
FREE PATTERNS

SUBSCRIBERS to the "N.Z. Woman's Weekly" are entitled each week to one of the patterns published in the current issue, without charge. Address all letters to Pattern Service, "N.Z. Woman's Weekly," P.O. Box 1469, Auckland, C.I., stating size required.

Be sure to send an addressed envelope, with a penny stamp, when making application.

Extra patterns are available at 3d (in stamps) each.

Patterns are available for one month from date of issue. None can be supplied after six months.

The service has been specially designed to meet the requirements of this Period. Its aim is to make it possible for New Zealand women to be smartly dressed.

DIAGRAMS OF OUR PATTERNS

INDICATIONS.
- = MEANS GATHER HERE.
- = MEANS PLEAT HERE.
= = MEANS STRAIGHT OF MATERIAL.
HALF- INCH TURNINGS ARE ALREADY ALLOWED FOR.

PATTERN 31.A—A tweed suit such as this is something that every smart woman should have in her wardrobe. The pattern is cut in eleven pieces, and is designed in three sizes: 32in bust, 36in hip; 34in bust, 38in hip; 36in bust, 40in hip. The length of the skirt is 28in. To make the suit, you will require 2yds of 54in-wide material.

PATTERN 31.B—Here is a charming style that you will not find difficult to make. The pattern is cut in nine pieces, and is designed in three sizes: 32in bust, 36in hip; 34in bust, 38in hip; 36in bust, 40in hip. The length of the skirt is 28in. To make it, you will require 1yd of 54in-wide material and half a yard of contrasting material 21in or 36in wide.

PATTERN 31.C—The tiny lap is sure to be a big success in this pretty frock. The pattern is cut in seven pieces, and is designed in two sizes: 22in chest, 18in length; four years, 23in chest, 18in length. The frock requires 1½yds to 1½yds of 36in-wide material.

PATTERN 32.D—This simple frock is sure to be very useful for you or your daughter. The pattern is cut in nine pieces, and is designed in three sizes: eight years, 32in chest, 35in length; ten years, 34in chest, 37in length; twelve years, 36in chest, 39in length. The frock requires 2½yds of 36in-wide material and three-eighths of a yard of 36in-wide material.

PATTERN 32.E—A really "masala" suit of pyjamas is this one. The pattern is cut in seven pieces, and is designed in three sizes: ten years, 35in chest; twelve years, 36in chest; fourteen years, 38in chest. The lay-out shown is for the largest size. The pyjamas require 3½yds of 36in-wide material, and five-eighths of a yard of contrasting material 21in wide.

PATTERN 32.F—The slender lines of this matron's frock are sure to make it a favourite. The pattern is cut in nine pieces, and is designed in three sizes: 38in bust, 42in hip; 40in bust, 44in hip; 42in bust, 46in hip. The length of the frock is 44in. The frock requires 3½yds of 36in-wide material, and five-eighths of a yard of contrasting material 21in wide.

READERS NOTE

Readers seeking for Free Patterns are reminded that they must affix sufficient postage to their letters, and that they must enclose an addressed envelope with a penny stamp. Unless these conditions are complied with, we regret that we cannot send Patterns asked for.

FOR FREE PATTERNS, SEE INSIDE BACK COVER.
Image Twenty-Six: The cover of the Druleigh Book of Pattern cutting supplied to students who studied on Druleigh courses. It is described, inside the front cover, as ‘a modern text book for home and professional dressmakers showing in simple terms the basic principles of pattern cutting and designing for any figure and to any style’ (Druleigh Publications, circa 1940s/1950s, cover).
CHAPTER SIX

THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR TWO

My experience in the WAAF did me a world of good. It removed me from the protective custody of home, and I listened to a flood of ideas I had never heard expressed, from women who came from backgrounds I had not dreamt of and who seemed, to my admiring eyes, to relate so naturally to men. Many unworldly girls like myself saw themselves as confident young women when they were demobbed in 1945, ready to take on the world.

What fools we were! The war may have been a revelation for the likes of us, but it wasn’t for those who had remained in their old jobs, nor for wives and mothers whose war effort was joining knitting bees (socks and balaclavas) and sending off food parcels to relatives in Britain and our soldiers (Hartley, 2001, p.4).

Over half of the interviewed dressmakers were working, or started their dressmaking careers, during the period of the Second World War. Their recollections of wartime life add primary confirmation to other sources documenting the effects of the war on the lives and work of New Zealand women; the focus of this chapter. It is apparent that the resourcefulness for which colonial women were renowned, was demanded again of New Zealand women during the war years. Women of all ages proved their capabilities in many fields, including the continuation and expansion of domestic crafts and skills, such as knitting and sewing. The majority of women had some knowledge of basic sewing and garment construction skills. This knowledge was consolidated by wartime demands to provide ingenious solutions to personal wardrobe requirements. Clothing factories also absorbed a number of women to maintain domestic and military production. Needlewomen were probably more fully occupied than at any other time in New Zealand’s history to this point. The fact that most women could sew, and were encouraged to sew out of necessity during the war years, reinforced a culture of acceptance of the home-made or dressmaker-made garment that was to persist until the 1980s.¹

6.1 NEW ZEALAND AT WAR

At 9.30 pm on 3 September 1939, New Zealand joined Britain, Australia, France, and India in declaring war on Germany. It was a war that was to wage for six years, with no combat ever
taking place on New Zealand’s shores, but it had a significant effect on the lives of all New
Zealanders. Throughout the war a total of two hundred and four thousand New Zealanders
served in the armed forces; one hundred and four thousand of them left the country to fight in
campaigns in the Middle East, North Africa, Greece, Italy, and the Pacific. The maximum
number serving overseas at any one time was about seventy-five thousand. Maori were also
involved, through the formation of the Maori Battalion, a volunteer force of Maori soldiers
and officers organised following the advocacy of Maori leaders. The Battalion established a
distinguished record of service in Italy, Greece, Crete and North Africa. A precedent for this
had been set in World War One when, despite a directive from the British Government that
“native troops” were not to be used in a conflict between “European races”, many Maori had
volunteered to do so (Keith, 2001, p.280). By December 1941, thirty per cent of the male
population aged between eighteen and forty-five was in the armed services. At this time, the
total population of New Zealand was about one million, six hundred and thirty thousand
(Ebbett, 1984; Keith, 2001; Taylor, 1986).

Obviously, much of the burden for maintaining the status quo at home fell to women. They
bore the responsibility for maintaining homes and farms, raising children, and assuming
previously unfamiliar roles in employment. While employment and the continuation of
essential industries may have led to exciting opportunities to move away from home and some
measure of independence for young single women; a state usually only achieved following
marriage; for most married and/or older women, the war was notable for its years of drudgery.
For six years or more, lives were inconvenienced by rationing of petrol, food and clothing.
There were shortages of power, food and coal (used as a source of heating and to fuel coal
range stoves for cooking); restrictions on lighting, train services and long distance travel; the
cessation of home deliveries of bread and other products; and blackout regulations. Able-
bodied men were conscripted into the armed forces, and their removal from the labour force led to the man-powering of non-serving men and a large number of women into employment in essential industries. There were also restrictions on movement within employment, and the application of fixed wage policies (Edmond, 1995; Montgomerie in Daley and Montgomerie, 1999).

In 1939, when war was declared, about one hundred and eighty thousand of New Zealand’s total workforce of approximately seven hundred thousand, were women. Most of them would have been unmarried women. The convention of the day dictated that women gave up work when they married, to be supported by their husbands while they maintained an efficient home. During the 1930s and 1940s, most women were paid considerably less than men, even if employed in exactly the same position, reinforcing the belief that employment for women was merely a short-term undertaking prior to marriage (Ebbett, 1984, pp.10-11). DB (personal interview, May 2003) recalls of her working days that she, “did all the fittings and measuring and ran the workroom, until the day I got married. And, of course, when I married (my husband), he was the Assistant City Treasurer - well, your wife didn’t go to work then. You never went to work.”

The advent of war threatened the staging of New Zealand’s centennial exhibition and celebrations, scheduled to take place from November 1939 to April 1940. They ultimately continued because much of the development had already been completed and its supporters, including the prime minister, saw it as a stimulant to patriotism and the national spirit (Keith, 2001, p.74). The exhibition covered over twenty-two hectares of land and attracted over two million, six hundred thousand visitors, considerably more than the population of the country at the time. The fair paid tribute to the pioneering spirit of New Zealanders and showcased
The role of women was not forgotten in the Centennial exhibitions. The women’s section displayed “women’s” arts and crafts, such as drawing, needlework and weaving, and the lecture hall featured talks and fashion parades. The talks were on “the latest developments in the solution of the housewife’s many problems, such as Simple Meals To Satisfy The Family, Children’s Fears, and The Art Of Icing.” As Phillips says, “these were intelligent and helpful attempts to discuss matters of concern to women, but women whose boundaries were defined by their domestic role” (Phillips, ‘New Zealand Centennial Exhibition’, n.d.).

6.2 HOME AND FAMILY

In the period directly before the commencement of World War Two, New Zealand had not fully recovered from the effects of the Depression. Full employment had not been universally restored, and the philosophy of “making do” and “making ends meet” was still deeply ingrained. This ability to ensure that nothing was wasted and to make the best of what was available was to serve home managers well during the war. The workload of women at home was not eased by labour-saving technology because much of it was unknown at this time. Many areas of the country had yet to be connected to electricity, and cooking had to be done on a gas or coal range. Refrigerators, washing machines, telephones and cars were not
commonly found in working class homes. After the war started, women not only had to
manage their workload unaided, but also take on the household responsibilities traditionally
undertaken by men; managing the finances, mowing lawns, maintaining a vegetable garden,
chopping firewood, and carrying in the coal, for example. “The old rigidly defined roles were
no longer applicable as domestic responsibilities were widened to absorb all the tasks which
men had usually accepted as their lot” (Ebbett, 1984, p.38).

Magazines were full of advice to women to assist them to cope with their new responsibilities
and with the ensuing shortages resulting from the state of war. A 1940 issue of the *New
Zealand Woman’s Weekly*, in its editorial entitled “Battle Behind The Front Line”, reminded
women that, “everything is valuable in a time of emergency.” Women were urged to save
newspapers, metal products, rags, bones, soap scraps and candle ends (*New Zealand Woman’s
Weekly*, 18 July 1940, p.1). In the same issue, the “Here’s A Hint” column (p.25) suggested
making mittens from discarded men’s socks, “in these wool hungry days.” By 1941, the
column had become “War Economy Hints” and readers were advised how to re-sole slippers
with a piece of linoleum and how to make cheap curtains from bed sheets (*New Zealand
Woman’s Weekly*, 4 December 1941, pp.30-31). The *New Zealand Home Journal*, (10 June
1943, pp.34-35), included instructions on how to unpick men’s white flannel trousers and re-
make them into working clothes for women or into a child’s coat, followed by more tips for
unpicking and re-working old garments to re-use the fabric (see Image Twenty-Seven, p.179).

The shortages that were to affect everyday life for seven years began to make an impact in
September 1939, with the rationing of petrol. This was followed by shortages of paper, due to
interrupted importation from Scandinavia and North America, and shoppers were asked to
take their own paper and bags to grocers’ and butchers’ shops. Household china, glassware
and enamel products became scarce early in 1941.

In the clothing and textiles area, the importation of silk stockings ceased in 1940; a hardship
more keenly felt in this era than today, when very few women wore trousers and many
employers insisted on the wearing of stockings in the workplace. Wool and cotton stockings
were available but were considered to be a very inferior product to the desirable silk versions
(Edmond, 1986; Taylor, 1986).

New Zealand’s first ration books (petrol coupons were always separate) were issued in April 1942, and
on 27 April rationing began, with sugar and stockings as the first items. Every woman over 16 years was
entitled, once in three months, to one pair of fully fashioned stockings, of silk, art silk or cotton (Taylor,
1986, p.760).

An extensive list of items were in short supply from early 1941, including tyres, new cars,
tools, plumbing fittings (including baths and sinks), cutlery, jewellery, and fancy biscuits.
The demand for wool for Armed Services requirements led to a shortage of carpets, blankets,
and knitting wool.

In 1942, new telephone installations were banned and the manufacture of a number of
electrical items for civilian use was prohibited; such as radios, water heaters, irons, kettles and
 Toasters. The most crucial shortage of 1942 was rubber, affecting the availability of tyres,
gumboots and hot water bottles. Petrol and tyres were such valuable commodities that, in
order to conserve stocks, home delivery of bread, meat, drapery and laundry was stopped, and
the delivery of groceries was severely curtailed. For most women, these commodities now
had to be collected, often on foot or by bicycle. The shortage of rubber led to the
disappearance of elastic from the shops and from many garments. Underwear, women’s
suspenders, and men’s braces and sock suspenders were affected by the scarcity of supply.
Women used to wearing elastically undergarments were forced to find ways to prolong the
lives of their corsets. The *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* assisted with an article entitled “Curing A Tired Corset”, that advised on how to mend splits in elasticated girdles and how to cope with corset bones or busks (*New Zealand Woman’s Weekly*, 25 November 1943, p.20).

The rationing of clothes began on 28 May 1942 and persisted until the end of 1947. Adults and children were issued with books of coupons that could be exchanged for clothing, footwear, and materials. The allowance per person per year was fifty-two coupons; a new winter coat could use up twelve coupons of the allowance. Making do with the number of coupons allocated was not always the issue; often the goods were not available for purchase (Ebbett, 1984; Taylor, 1986).

As with tea and sugar, clothing coupons had to be cut from books by retailers, except for mail orders where they had to be fastened to slips showing the name and address of the sender. The numbers needed for each garment were published in trade lists, in newspapers, and on cardboard envelopes sold to protect the fragile ration books. For instance, from the yearly 52 coupons a man’s three-piece suit took 16,…a raincoat 8,…woollen slacks 5, jersey or cardigan 3, shirt or blouse 2, pyjamas or a nightdress 4,…a woman’s two-piece suit took 11, a fur coat 15, a dress 4 (Taylor, 1986, p.792).

The number of coupons required for dress fabric was calculated in relation to the number and type of garments that the fabric would produce. Unrationed textiles included butter muslin, curtain net, curtains, canvas, and furnishing fabrics, and it was not unusual to see some of these fabrics appearing made up into dresses or housecoats. Knitting wool was originally covered by clothing coupons but, by 1943, separate coupons were introduced specifically for the purchase of wool (Nicholson, 1998; Taylor, 1986).

Several of the dressmakers interviewed have confirmed that there were shortages of fabrics during the war. PF said, “Yes, it was terrible to get materials. You had coupons and your friends gave you coupons if you were getting married so you could get enough for a dress” (PF, personal interview, April 2003). PF also recalled that the war was responsible for creating a fashion for fabric or fabric covered hats. New felt hoods or straws were scarce, but
a hat could be made from small pieces of fabric or an old hat remodelled by covering it with fabric.

Wedding garments or fabrics seemed to be particularly difficult to obtain or allow for under the rationing system. Dressmaker DB recalls that she was delighted when friends of her husband, owners of a drapery store, gave them the cream satin for her wedding gown and enough green sprigged organza for the bridesmaids’ dresses, as a wedding gift. This saved their precious clothing coupons, although it did not please the bride’s sister, one of the bridesmaids, because she had a strong aversion to wearing green (DB, personal interview, May 2003). DS spoke of her good fortune in being in Evans’ drapery shop in Wellington just at the time when a bolt of white brocade was delivered.

I had been looking for material for my bridal dress and I was just lucky to be in the shop at that time, and I bought what I wanted then and it was 1/6 a yard. After the war, gradually they started to bring in more. There was always a certain amount in the shops but anything really special, like me, you were just lucky to strike (DS, personal interview, November 1999).

JM made her own wedding dress of fine wool.

It wasn’t a real bridal frock because it was during the war and people were very conscious of the fact that you didn’t spend money unwisely. But it was a beautiful frock and I loved it. It was a beautiful blue (JM, personal interview, June 2000).

Mothers struggling to clothe growing children received some reprieve in January 1943, when an additional twenty-six clothing coupons were issued for every child from the ages of five to seventeen. The education of children continued during the war, despite the potential disruptions resulting from a shortage of teachers, equipment, and school buildings. The school milk scheme, started in 1937 to give each child free milk during the morning break, was continued during the war. Free apples were also distributed from 1941 to 1945, because the country was unable to export them as usual, due to a lack of refrigerated shipping (Taylor, 1986, p.1125; Keith, 2001, p.224). For most of the war, the school leaving age remained at fourteen, although it was possible to leave school at thirteen if the child had passed the requirements of the final year of primary school. These young school leavers found
employment easily in factories, replacing workers who had enlisted in the armed forces. Girls commonly went into employment in the clothing factories and workrooms. Concern that children were being exploited and expected to work long hours injurious to their health, in this time of labour shortages, led to the raising of the school leaving age to fifteen from the beginning of 1944 (Taylor, 1986, p.1133).

Schools prepared children for the possibility of invasion by holding regular air raid drills. Children “wore identity tags round their necks and carried tins containing cotton wool for blocking the ears against blast and a cork for gripping between the teeth” (Keith, 2001, p.285). Children were expected to do their bit for the war effort. Those living on farms managed additional farm duties, to assist mothers who were responsible for keeping the farms running while fathers were serving overseas (Ebbett, 1984, p.40).

School children, particularly Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, were obvious house-to-house gatherers for the many salvage collections, of scrap metal, bottles, paper, rags and rubber, both in special drives and as routine measures (Taylor, 1986, p.1140).

Schools encouraged their pupils to be involved in patriotic activities; raising money for patriotic funds, knitting and sewing items of clothing for soldiers and refugees, learning first aid techniques, and growing vegetables in school gardens. Older school children and university students were placed on farms or employed as fruit and vegetable pickers during their school holidays (Taylor, 1986, pp.1141-1146).

A sense of the resourcefulness of women in particular, is very apparent during this period. Homemaking and craft skills passed from generation to generation, and expected of women during this period, were to prove invaluable. Many women could sew or knit, and did so for themselves, family, friends, and the forces overseas. As a child during the war, Heather Nicholson looks back at the lives of women then, and comments:
Those of us who were at school during the 1940s had very little understanding of how our mothers’ and aunts’ lives consisted of endlessly making do, raising funds, stretching rations, worrying about the boys overseas and for relaxation, knitting comforts. For them, there were no exciting outings with American Marines. They were more likely to find themselves cooking and mending for servicemen brought home by their daughters, rather than dancing the nights away (Nicholson, 1998, p.117).

Her mention of American Marines refers to one of the few aspects of the war that provided some colour, entertainment, and diversion from ongoing mundanity. Japanese activity in the Pacific towards the end of 1941 was of major concern to New Zealand, with its lack of an effective domestic defence force. New Zealand’s own troops were in Greece and the Middle East, leaving its coastline dangerously exposed to attack, guarded as it was by only a partly-trained and poorly armed volunteer home guard. After months of anxiety, United States’ President Roosevelt agreed to send a division of marines to New Zealand, provided New Zealand left its own troops in the Middle East. Between 1942 and mid 1944, more than one hundred thousand United States servicemen spent periods of time in New Zealand, mainly in the Auckland and Wellington areas, using the country as a base from which to launch offensives in the Pacific (Keith, 2001, pp.288-289).

Going to the movies was an extremely popular entertainment during the war years and New Zealanders were familiar only with the image of Americans portrayed in the movies. The young marines who were based in New Zealand may have measured up to some extent to this image. They were certainly renowned for their charm, good looks, generosity, and their smart well-fitting uniforms. Their polite practices of calling women “Ma’am”; making way for them on footpaths and buses; tipping generously for services rendered; and giving gifts of flowers and confectionery to their hostesses marked them as quite different to New Zealand men. Women of all ages were quite intrigued by the Americans, and they were invited into local homes and were accepted as entertaining companions by young women. Local men
were not so impressed by them however, believing the Americans to be competitors for the attentions of their wives and girlfriends.

Not only did an American take flowers, chocolates, stockings and cigarettes to his date, pay her extravagant compliments and treat her with extreme courtesy, but he also took flowers and candy to her mother, treating her with the same gallantry. Such men were a force to be reckoned with (Ebbett, 1984, p.155).

Local organisations arranged entertainments for the servicemen and for the purpose of raising patriotic funds. Concert parties that toured the military camps, dances and card evenings were particularly popular. One of the dressmakers interviewed related that during the war, the upmarket department store that she worked for was invited to send a number of girls to entertainment evenings for officers. The girls were invited from the supervisory and office staff, not the shop floor, to evenings in a local lounge, that involved conversation, music and dancing, but no smoking or drinking.

And then (two women from work) formed what they called the Zealandia Dance Club to entertain the troops. And it was in the Latimer Hall in Latimer Square. So, we were all in on that - all the workroom came to that. You could go and pay. And then, through that, we got invitations to go over to Godley Heads, and to Weedons just past Rolleston, and by the Addington Showgrounds too, and you went once a fortnight to a dance. And they’d send in the army trucks for us. (We’d wear our best frocks.) Not long frocks, no off-the-shoulder; just an up-to-date afternoon tea dress. Might have a collar and revers; could have a long sleeve, or could have a three-quarter or a short sleeve. They were dressy dresses. Had to be properly attired (DB, personal interview, May 2003).

6.3 WARTIME EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN

The Second World War has been somewhat simplistically presented on occasions as a significant event that changed women’s employment opportunities from that point on, and allowed them access to occupations previously considered to be the preserve of men. The reality is considerably more complex. It is true that, during the war, female drivers, tram conductors, deliverers of the mail, and herd testers, for example, demonstrated that women could assume roles traditionally regarded as masculine. It is also true that the number of women working outside the home increased substantially. The 1936 census recorded that one hundred and thirty-nine thousand women were engaged in income earning employment. The
next census was not taken until 1945, due to the wartime labour shortage and, by then, the number had increased to one hundred and sixty-three thousand. However, the National Service Department had estimated that the female workforce reached a peak of about two hundred and thirty thousand for a period in 1943 (Montgomerie, 2001, pp.21-22).

Many women entering the workforce during this period did not have a choice in where they wanted to work or may, in fact, not have been seeking work at all. Towards the end of 1941, with so many of the former workforce now serving in the armed forces, the government passed legislation to exert some control over the labour force. The Government Placement Service, originally concerned with placing the unemployed in work, became, in its twenty-two locations, the Manpower Office, a branch of the National Service Department. Manpower committees had the right to require male and female civilians to register for work, to direct them into specific employment, to prevent them from leaving employment in essential industries, and to take measures to deal with absenteeism (Ebbett, 1984, p.47; Taylor, 1986, pp.663-665).

The effect of the Manpower regulations was far-reaching and, up to the point of introduction, completely unheard of in a formerly unregulated labour market. Traditionally, the New Zealand labour force had been highly mobile, with employees readily moving on to new positions that paid more, and employers secure in the knowledge that a surplus of labour allowed them to hire and fire at will. The war initially favoured the employee, whose services were then in demand, by leading to increased wages (Taylor, 1986, p.664). Ebbett noted that:

At the outbreak of war there was a considerable pool of unemployed people available to fill the gaps left by men swallowed up by the services. Married women and retired people also helped to alleviate the new shortage of workers. But eventually demand from industries and the war effort became too much for the voluntary labour market and many people of both sexes were forced out of their homes and into service in one capacity or another. Many single women who had never worked outside the home because their families were affluent enough to support them joined forces with married women who had expected to be wives and mothers and little else for the rest of their lives, to become key figures in the new industrial...
labour force. For better or worse a whole populace allowed itself to be directed and manipulated by its fellow citizens in a way quite unacceptable in peacetime (Ebbett, 1984, pp.47-48).

Dressmaker DB (personal interview, May 2003) recalled how this practice affected her personally. She and three of her workmates attempted to resign from the department store workroom where they were employed, in order to enlist in the armed forces. They were not permitted to leave because they were considered to be engaged in essential work. DB also remembered that two women who disliked their positions as workroom machinists could not leave, but were transferred to furnishing and alterations departments. PF (personal interview, April 2003) remembered that her older sister was employed as a tailoress making military uniforms. When the sister was required at home to care for her ill mother and young sister, the company arranged for her to continue sewing as an outworker. She was finally able to leave work when she became pregnant with her first child. IG (personal interview, March 2002) was not required to work because she had two young children. However, she recalled the difficulties of surviving on her husband’s Air Force income and enduring his absence overseas for three years.

ED (personal interview, June 2001) wasn’t manpowered into making military uniforms because she chose to seek employment as a tailoress when the war started. She had given up self-employment when she married in 1937. She commented that she was able to get a good position because she was “properly trained”. Taylor (1986, p.676) says of the advent of industrial conscription:

As the range of work accepting and seeking women widened, the number of women willing to do tedious or unattractive tasks shrank. Many girls, especially those in shops and offices, instead of waiting for direction to some distasteful task, sought out essential work acceptable to themselves, or volunteered into the services, causing a ripple of job movement ahead of Manpower pressure.

ED made officers’ uniforms for a central Auckland business called Olsen and Greer, then moved to work with a Mister Crawshaw, a self-employed tailor who made navy officers’
uniforms. ED admits that she was in fact fired from Olsen and Greer for taking time off work, and not returning at the expected time, when her husband was on his final leave prior to departing overseas. She said:

I was given the task of making, doing all the braid on the sleeves and the shoulders, and it was very intricate, this gold braid. You used to have a sixpenny piece you had to start from, and do this all round until you draw it all in to (make) the hole in the middle of it, and it was very intricate and very interesting for me because, over the years, I’d remember all these big names of these officers and people in the forces that I have come across since, right up to very recently when I’d been going over to the Naval Reserve (in Devonport, Auckland) (ED, personal interview, June 2001).

Edmond (1995, pp.147-149) has also recorded the experiences of a woman employed in the making of officers’ uniforms during the war.

Lubransky’s was a First Class tailors - that is, they did mostly made-to-order suits, dinner suits and tails, ladies’ costumes, and such like. During World War II they also did a lot of officers’ uniforms and overcoats. That was First Class work, but the ordinary soldiers’ uniforms were made in factories. We workers at Lubransky’s called that slop work because not nearly so much care went into making the uniforms.

I worked on the uniforms of all the services - Army, Navy, and Air Force. All the gold braid had to be sewn on by hand, and the spaces between the stripes on the sleeves and the epaulettes had to be very carefully measured, and the middle of the stripes had to be exactly on the centre of the sleeve. The braid was made of metal thread which made the needles break all the time. It also made your fingers bleed, and we had to be so careful not to get blood on the fabric. All the uniforms had brass buttons, which were usually sewn on, but sometimes they were detachable. If a uniform was needed in a hurry I would have to take it home after work and sit up until it was done, sometimes until 4.00 a.m.

CM (personal interview, July 2001) started her apprenticeship during the war, in 1943. She remembers that her introduction to sewing was as a finisher, completing the hand sewing on women’s coats. The company, L. P. Birch Limited, was apparently directed to do war work and CM was then involved in the making of Women’s Auxiliary Army Corp uniforms. CM also recalls that other young women were sent there to work as part of the war regulations but they frequently caused problems for the woman who managed the business. It seems that the young women were more interested in partying with the visiting American servicemen than in going to work.

When dressmaker JM was asked if she continued dressmaking through the war years, after her marriage in 1941, she replied:
No, because I married a policeman and, in those days, wives of policemen were not allowed to go to work. In fact, most women didn’t work after they married. It was only during the war, when they were conscripted, that they went to work. And, probably, it was (because) a policeman’s wife wasn’t allowed to have any interest in a business, because of financial difficulties or whatever (JM, personal interview, June 2000).

In fact, Taylor (1986, p.958) reports that:

In the interests of efficiency and integrity police regulations had long prohibited members of the force doing outside paid work in their spare time. Wives were included in this ban, thereby avoiding the possibility of policemen through their wives being involved in any dubious enterprises.

However, when childless married women aged eighteen to thirty became eligible for direction into employment under the Manpower regulations in 1943, the wives of policemen were not exempt. By this time, JM had a child and was therefore not required to register.

Some of the first industries declared to be essential were munitions production, defence construction, mines, timber mills, power supply, freezing works, dairy factories, woollen mills, and clothing and footwear manufacturers (Taylor, 1986, p.664). Employers engaged in essential industries could apply to the Manpower Committees for additional staff. Employers responsible for non-essential occupations, such as domestic service and shop and office work, who did not qualify for manpowered staff, had to maintain their workforces as best they could. They often relied on retired people and women with young children to fill the vacancies (Taylor, 1986, p.49). (See Image Twenty-Eight, p. 180).

Montgomerie (2001, p.86) notes that, early in the war, when clothing and footwear factories, hospitals, schools, government departments, and canneries were all declared essential industries, thousands of women already in employment in these areas were brought under the authority of the manpower regulations, independent of the age-based orders. The effect of this was to hold these women in their existing jobs from the point that those jobs were declared essential.
6.4 THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON THE PRODUCTION OF CLOTHING

Textile mills, and clothing and footwear manufacturing, had traditionally been strong areas of female employment for many years. As Taylor (1986, p.676) says:

Several of the first industries declared essential, notably clothing, woollen mills and boot and shoe making, were largely staffed by women, who were thus in the Manpower bag from the outset, and other such declarations followed. There was no delicacy about holding women in jobs that they had already chosen.

Montgomerie reports that New Zealand clothing, footwear and textile industries had been expanding in the late 1930s, due to the shelter of import restrictions, and the number of women employed in these industries had grown significantly. At the start of the war, there were an estimated nineteen thousand women employed in clothing, textiles and leather manufacturing, and this number remained constant throughout 1940 and 1941 (Montgomerie, 2001, pp.64-65). When the Manpower regulations took effect from 1942, these industries were the locations for over twenty per cent of the directions of women into employment.

The main effect of doing war work for women employed in the clothing industry was that they were frequently expected to make a completely different type of garment. Clothing machinists could be moved from non-essential to priority work, such as military uniforms and utility clothing. This movement could take place within a company or from company to company. Taylor (1986, p.671) gives this example:

With sections of firms declared essential, there was inevitably a great deal of looseness: one week 20 girls might be sewing khaki shirts while 10 sewed women’s dresses, but the proportions might vary from week to week. Manufacturers were supposed to notify Manpower when military contracts ended or were reduced, and such commitments were supposed to be under constant review, but inevitably there were blurrings and time-lags. An employer with an Army contract would be loath to lose staff and have to queue again at the Manpower office if the contract might be renewed in the next month, and meanwhile there would be keen civilian demand for anything he could produce.

The first transfers of young women were from clothing manufacturers without service contracts to factories making uniforms, in Auckland in 1942. According to Taylor (1986, p.677), early directions in Wellington included a dressmaker and a housemaid who were
directed into making battledress. Image Twenty-Nine (p. 181) shows women sewing military uniforms at a Wellington factory.

One of the difficulties for the clothing industry was that working in a clothing factory did not feature very highly in the informal hierarchy of female employment. Clerical work was considered to be the most desirable work, followed by working in retail shops, then by factory work, and with domestic service below that again. Clothing industry positions were traditionally poorly paid. The industry was a major employer of women, in comparison to other industries, and women within the industry vastly outnumbered men. The Manpower’s authority to fix wages at a time when demand could have forced an escalation of wages, made the industry even less attractive (Montgomerie, 2001, p.122). Montgomerie reports that there was a belief that the manpower regulations awarded unfair advantages to the manufacturers, allowing them to maintain clothing workers’ wages at a level that was barely enough to live on. She quotes the views of John Roberts, then Secretary of the Canterbury Clothing Workers’ Union:

Nemesis is overtaking the clothing manufacturers, unable to attract girls because of the wages paid, manufacturers are looking for a compulsory supply of labour from other branches of the industry and from other occupations. Unable to compete for labour with shops, offices, hairdressing and beauty parlours, hotels and so on, they are seeking to use the regulations to get them out of a difficulty created by their own low wage policy of pre-import control days.

The Union’s efforts to achieve better wages and conditions for its members, or to allow some movement within the industry to force the worst employers to make changes, were unsuccessful. Trained machinists, manpowered when their industry was declared essential, were kept at the award rates of pay. Women directed from outside the industry had their wages topped up to meet the level of their earnings prior to direction. According to Ebbett (1984, p.55), fourteen thousand women had been directed to work in the clothing industry by 1945, and Montgomerie (2001, p.182), reports that, two months after it lost the protection of
Manpower control early in 1946, the clothing industry had three thousand five hundred vacancies for women workers.

Manpower restrictions were relaxed gradually, starting after the end of the war in Europe. However, workers were not finally given the freedom to change or leave jobs at will until June 1946. Married women were the first to be released from the controls. The Minister of Industrial Manpower stated that, “all married women will, on application, receive automatic consent to leave essential industries if they desire to take up home duties”, thereby returning women to the pre-war status quo, reinforcing that a married woman’s place was in the home (Ebbett, 1984, p.55).

6.5 AUSTERITY MEASURES

Regulations affecting the design of clothing, intended to reduce the amount of fabric used and the time and skill required to produce garments, were not introduced in New Zealand until October 1942. Manufacturers had pre-empted this approximately two months earlier, electing to simplify styles in women’s and children’s clothing voluntarily, in the hope that regulation could be avoided. It appears that women may have been expecting curtailment of sartorial excesses for some time. The writer of the social column in the New Zealand Woman’s Weekly signalled this in mid-1940, commenting:

If the new clothes people were wearing at the Wellington Racing Club’s winter meeting at Trentham last week really were bought for “the duration”, as I heard so many affirm, then I must approve their choice. “Plain and good” describes the majority (New Zealand Woman’s Weekly, 18 July 1940, p.15).

However, the government decided that more stringent controls than self-regulation were necessary. The regulations of October 1942 sought economies in the manufacture of outergarments for everyone except brides, pregnant women, and children under eleven. Clothing for women and girls could not have capes, hoods, double yokes, full sleeves, cuffs or
pleats on trousers. Suits could only be two-piece and dresses could not have matching coats, jackets or boleros. Restrictions were applied to the production of full-length dresses and beachwear. Skirt lengths were regulated to finish a specified distance from the floor and jackets must finish no more than ten and a half inches below the waist (Taylor, 1986, p.836).

Women appeared to accept these dictates without protest. A Wellington draper suggested that this was because the regulations did not order skirts shorter than the current fashion and that business was likely to be diverted from clothing manufacturers to drapers, for women would want to make what they could not buy (Dominion, 31 October 1942, p.8).

Taylor (1986, p.836), reports that New Zealand men, like their counterparts in Britain, were the source of the greatest protest. Regulations applied to menswear did not allow for the addition of cuffs on trousers, a very unpopular move. Also, for men and boys, coats, jackets and waistcoats could not be double-breasted. Any unnecessary trims such as belts, pleats, pockets over a certain number, yokes, and buttons applied purely for decoration were not permitted. Trousers could not have pleats, extended waistbands, or ankle widths exceeding twenty inches.

The main feature of womenswear throughout the war appeared to be “simplification without meagreness” (Taylor, 1986, p.840). Taylor reports that many day clothes shown in advertisements display few signs of wartime austerity. Patterns featured in publications such as the New Zealand Woman’s Weekly and the New Zealand Home Journal support this. Dresses incorporated pintuck and embroidery trims, pleated or gored skirts, shirtwaists with buttoned fronts, crossover bodices or bodices finished with appliqué or braid; all options that did not restrict design.
There was more variety available than (the advertisements) might indicate: not all dresses were advertised, and for dressmakers and women who made their own clothes there was no limitation in style. There was not the variety of rich and colourful material that there used to be, but attractive materials were still displayed and could be made up at home. There was something of a cult in brightening up dresses with new belts, embroidery, changes of collar. Both home and professional dressmakers were making smart new clothes out of old ones, cutting up, turning, dyeing and joining new material to old. Home dressmaking classes, with special advice on using remnants, were popular (Taylor, 1986, pp.840-841).

Even underwear could be made at home, as demonstrated in examples in Image Thirty (p. 182).

6.6 COMPARING NEW ZEALAND TO BRITAIN AND AUSTRALIA

The New Zealand government appealed to the patriotism of New Zealanders and their familial connections to Britain, to urge New Zealanders to work hard and produce more. Government propaganda contrasted the relatively comfortable situation in New Zealand with the hazards faced by those “at home” in Britain. Montgomerie (2001, p.28), states that:

British precedents were often cited as a model for war work in New Zealand, especially by women frustrated at not being allowed to play a greater part in the national struggle. The British women’s war effort was well publicised, especially by the *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* which assiduously ran a regular column about the responses of British women to the war, as well as features on specific aspects of their work. The war brought massive disruption to civilian life in Britain and that greater “degree of emergency” allowed the government there to make extensive use of its female population.

British women were mobilised into industry, civil defence, and the armed forces in much higher proportions than New Zealand women. In Britain, by the end of 1943, over eighty per cent of all single women aged eighteen to fifty-nine were in employment. Married women and widows were included in that number. From December 1941, single British women were conscripted into the armed forces. New Zealand women were not subjected to military conscription, and industrial conscription was not introduced until March 1942 and affected a narrower age band (Montgomerie, 2001, p.28). Also, because of the British government’s need for female labour, it was forced to organise arrangements for child care, communal eating, and assistance with shopping. The New Zealand government avoided the provision of these services by not manpowering women with children (Montgomerie in Brookes, Macdonald, Tennant, 1992, p.191). In Australia, the Women’s Employment Board was
formed in 1942 to draft women into essential wartime work (Australian Women’s Weekly, October 2003, p.99).

The rationing of clothing in Great Britain was introduced much earlier than in New Zealand and Australia. Initially, at the beginning of the war, clothing was still in plentiful supply due to increasing numbers being clothed by the armed forces. The high prices being asked for clothing as a result of profiteering and due to the introduction of purchase tax, also lessened demand. Winston Churchill’s government, formed in May 1940, applied a programme of price control, rationing of clothing, and a campaign to persuade women to sew. Clothes rationing was introduced in June 1941 to ensure the even distribution of clothing after it was revealed that the clothing retail price index was sixty-six per cent higher than it had been in 1938 (Reynolds in Burman, 1999, p.328).

The British public were issued with an annual allowance of coupons that could be exchanged for items of clothing, a system that was later to be introduced in New Zealand and Australia. However, in Britain, although rationing and the purchase tax had reduced the consumption of clothing, the measures did not ensure that supplies were evenly distributed. For many families, the high price of new clothing put these items beyond their reach. Reynolds (in Burman, 1999, p.329) reports that:

The Utility Clothing Scheme was a direct government intervention into the British clothing markets, to control quality and limit prices charged on the majority of all ready-made clothing and cloth. Purchase Tax was then removed on most Utility cloth and clothing and increased on the small proportion of non-utility goods. This stabilized prices aligning them to the majority of people’s personal income. The result of these measures was that clothing became more affordable to the majority of British families.

The Drapers Record, the journal of the British drapery and garment industries, called the introduction of the Utility Scheme, “the first step in standardising manufactured products to regulate the use of materials”, (Drapers Record Centenary Supplement, August 1987, p.34).
The Scheme’s regulations fixed maximum prices and margins. Manufacturers were not permitted to make more than four per cent profit on their costs of production and sale. Utility standards were still in place six years after the war ended, although post-war styles were being manufactured within those restrictions.

One of the effects of the rationing of both the number of items and the quantity of materials used in clothing, was that wealthy British women were, for the first time, unable to obtain the vast wardrobes of clothing that they were accustomed to consuming. Reynolds suggests that these women were generally unused to making and mending clothes themselves, and were used to employing women to do so. However, the women who normally worked in this capacity had volunteered or been conscripted into essential war work, leaving “many households in the top-income bracket bereft of women skilled in plain dressmaking and routine mending” (Reynolds in Burman, 1999, p.329).

The British Board of Trade was exhorted by women’s groups to establish a structure that would promote and provide dressmaking and mending classes to women. This led to the establishment of the “Make-do and Mend Department” within the Board of Trade. With a small staff, and in conjunction with the Board of Education, this department was instrumental in increasing the number of classes, particularly evening classes, in basic dressmaking and renovation skills. It was also responsible for instigating a nationwide public relations campaign to encourage women to attend. The classes were extremely popular and Reynolds (in Burman, 1999, p. 331) reports that, “by early 1943 the Board of Education was running 12,000 Make-do and Mend and dressmaking classes in their evening and technical schools. A similar number were also run by women’s voluntary groups.”
The success of the Make-do and Mend campaign led to the requirement, under the 1944 Education Act, for all girls to learn some practical needlework skills at school. Many schools were equipped with new sewing machines and commercial pattern books. The subject continued to be offered during the 1950s and 1960s, and women’s magazines of the same period continued to promote home dressmaking to British women (Reynolds in Burman, 1999, p.337).

The phrase “Make-do and Mend” had entered the national lexicon and was also widely referred to in Australia and New Zealand. The New Zealand dressmakers who are the focus of this study were very familiar with the phrase and the philosophy of the practice, as they started or continued their dressmaking careers through the war or post-war years. New Zealand women were accustomed to the inclusion of home-made or dressmaker-made garments in their wardrobes and were frequently capable of making these garments themselves, therefore a heritage of craft skills had already developed. The practice of having one’s clothes made by a dressmaker was widely supported before, during, and following the war years. Images Thirty-One, Thirty-Two and Thirty-Three (pp. 183 – 185) provide examples of dressmaker-made dresses made by a New Zealand dressmaker in 1948. Chapter Seven looks more closely at the progression of the dressmakers’ careers, the extent of their clothing production, and evaluation of their contributions to the fashion industry.

NOTES

i The reduction of tariffs on imported apparel during the 1980s led to the ready availability of very affordable imported clothing. In turn, many domestic manufacturers went out of business due to their inability to compete with such low prices. This is covered in more depth in Chapter Eight.

ii Practitioners who tested dairy herds to determine such factors as state of health and milk yields.
Manpower offices established the following requirements for registration:
March 1942 - men aged forty-six to forty-nine; women aged twenty to twenty-one; men aged eighteen to seventy with experience in the building, engineering and metal trades. April 1942 - all men aged fifty. May 1942 - men aged eighteen to sixty-five who had timber work experience. July 1942 - women aged twenty-two to twenty-five living near Hamilton, to work in a local munitions factory. August 1942 - women aged twenty-two to twenty-three. September 1942 - women aged twenty-four to thirty. October 1942 - men aged fifty-one to fifty-nine. February 1943 - scientists and technicians and women aged eighteen and nineteen. January 1944 - women aged thirty-one to forty. Married women with dependent children younger than sixteen were exempt. Men aged eighteen to forty-five who were not fit for military service were automatically registered for essential employment (Taylor, 1986, p.665).

Taken from a letter written by John Roberts and published in the Christchurch Press in 1944.

For example, an issue of the New Zealand Home Journal (10 June, 1943, p.34) assures women that “we certainly will all want to ‘make do’ as much as we can”, and, according to May (1992, p.27), “‘Making do’ …was ingrained into everyone, rich or poor, as a moral obligation”. May (1992, p.42), also suggests that, “mend, make-do and thrifty homemaking previously associated with the Depression were exalted as a patriotic task”.

178
Image Twenty-Seven: During World War Two, the New Zealand Woman’s Weekly published hints and provided patterns to assist home dressmakers to recycle clothing (Lynch, 2004, p. 84)
Women volunteered for, or were manpowered into, previously unfamiliar types of work to assist the war effort during World War Two. The women in this photograph are loading rounds of ammunition into clips at a Hamilton factory (Ebbett, 1984, p. 53).
Image Twenty-Nine: Clothing manufacturers could be directed into the production of items for the military, and able seamstresses manpowered into working for these businesses, during World War Two. These women are sewing battledress at Cathie and Sons’ factory in Wellington (Ebbett, 1984, p. 49).
Image Thirty: Examples of wartime fashions. These Mirror patterns encouraged home dressmaking with simple styles and suggested saving clothing coupons ‘by making your own undies’ (Ebbett, 1984, p.96).
Image Thirty-One: One of the interviewed dressmakers (on the right) wears a smart crepe dress of her own making, to Randwick Races in Sydney in 1948.
Image Thirty-Two: Dressmaker-made linen suits in pale pink and pale blue; Sydney 1948.
Image Thirty-Three: Dressmaker-made outfits, originating from New Zealand, worn in a Sydney Street in 1948. The dressmaker on the left is dressed in beige soft linen with a pink floral pattern.
The fitting of a dress is a thing not to be hurried, and mothers should carefully supervise it themselves, for dressmakers are shifty folk at the best; and, as it is generally easier to do anything badly than well, the children will suffer from neglect in this respect. It wants both knowledge and firmness on the part of the mother to get a dress properly made; for the maker, as a rule, has a powerful store of arguments by which she defends her errors, and the genus dressmaker is too apt to keep the genus lady in a state of hopeless and miserable subjection (Ballin, 1885, p.190).

By 1960, sixteen of the women who form the focus of this study were actively employed in dressmaking work. Seven had started in this trade during the 1930s or earlier; the balance started during the 1940s or 1950s. At the time of interview, the dressmakers ranged in age from fifty-nine years old to ninety-three years old. This chapter discusses the dressmakers’ responses to the questions that were put to them during face-to-face interviews and, in the case of two of the dressmakers, responses that were forwarded by mail. Their family backgrounds, training and employment, and business operation are documented and evaluated to ascertain the nature of dressmaking activities within the wider field of the production of apparel in New Zealand. Generally, the conduct of the dressmakers’ lives and work fitted the typical prescription of post-war New Zealand society. In the immediate post-war years, there was a strong emphasis on home and family, and a desire to create a society where “the men would be secure in stable careers, the women in comfortable homes, and together they would raise perfect children” (King, 1988, p.7). According to King, national trends emerged such as:

a rapid development of city suburbs and suburban culture (concentration on the nuclear family, on house and garden); a growth in philosophical and political conservatism (a steady movement of support from the Labour Party to National, which was eventually elected to government in 1949, and the build-up of the Cold War mentality); a growth in a more overt materialism than had been apparent previously, centring on a need for better homes and more consumer goods (washing machines, family cars, fashionable clothing - the phenomena that came to be known collectively as “keeping up with the Joneses”) (King, 1988, p.7).
During the post-war period, and particularly after the demise of all wartime rationing regimes in 1950, New Zealand experienced a period of sustained economic growth and considerably heightened levels of prosperity.

New Zealand was rapidly developing an urbanised, consumer culture … Consumerism developed hand-in-hand with suburbanisation and the reification of the family. In this period New Zealand’s consumption of commodities was greater than ever before. The ownership of material goods was a visible indicator of status and it also served to define gender identities. Men could gain prestige from the ownership of a certain type of car, and the number of household appliances a family possessed attested to the man’s capabilities as a breadwinner and technocrat (Andrewes in Daley and Montgomerie, 1999, pp.191-193). The downside of this was that any man who could not afford to acquire this lifestyle for his family, faced the alternative of going into debt or accepting that it was essential for his wife to be employed. The ideal of masculinity, and the measure of a man’s success, was his ability to provide for his family, and incurring debt or having a working wife undermined that construct (Andrewes in Daley and Montgomerie, 1999, p.193).

7.1 THE DRESSMAKERS; BACKGROUND AND TRAINING

7.1.1 Marriage and Family

All of the dressmakers interviewed were married and had children, ranging in number from one child to seven children. Ten of the interviewees practised as dressmakers in Auckland or Wellington, New Zealand’s two largest cities, although over half this group also lived and worked in smaller towns at some period of their working lives. Considering the total group, the spread of their dressmaking activities took place over a broad area of the country and included urban and rural areas. Fourteen interviewees had childhood memories of family members who sewed, and many mentioned that their mothers, while not professional dressmakers, made all the clothes for their families. Growing up with access to fabrics and sewing machines, and assistance with learning sewing skills, was a common experience for most of the interviewees.
All of the women, apart from two, worked outside the home in the dressmaking or tailoring trades prior to marriage. Employment ranged from formal apprenticeships, to experience gained in small dressmaking workrooms or larger clothing factories, to ownership of a dressmaking business. Several curtailed their dressmaking activities following marriage and the advent of motherhood, and resumed the practice when their children reached school age. It appears that the husbands of the dressmakers, contrary to the widely held perceptions of male attitudes to working wives, were either supportive or tolerant of their wives’ work. However, this is difficult to assess and might be because the work was generally conducted in the home, possibly with the least disruption to domestic life. An insight can be gained from IG (personal interview, March 2002) who commented that, when she suggested to her husband that she find a job now that all the children were at school, “he didn’t like that idea - it wasn’t done in those days”. She did find dressmaking work in a factory, working only school hours. She would leave factory work when she got bored with it, resume dressmaking at home, return to the factory when loneliness drove her to it; repeating this pattern for several years. Her husband obviously became reconciled to this, because IG later said, “he was very proud of what I did. I remember him saying to one of the girls one day, I’ve been watching your mother for years and I still don’t know how she does it”.

Some husbands appear to have been actively supportive, as demonstrated by the response of dressmaker PC:

My husband never ever said to me once, give up that machine, you’re wasting your time. He would come along, sit and talk, and I’d just have my head down sewing. I’d say to him, I can’t answer you, and he’d say, just take your time, I’m just sitting here, and it gave me a wonderful feeling of home. He never objected once. I said to him, I’m always on the machine with my head down. He said, your life is yours, we’re all together here and I can talk to you or I can read. He was completely easygoing… He’d clip the cottons and he’d sit talking to me. He’d put the kids to bed for me (PC, personal interview, March 2000).

Three other dressmakers gave similar responses; that their husbands “didn’t mind” or “never complained about it” or “he thought it was marvellous”.
PC, in common with the other dressmakers, made her family her priority when her children were young. She would start sewing after the children had gone to school and finish at six in the evening to make dinner. If her husband worked late, she would feed the children at six and continue sewing until her husband came home, then stop to have her meal with him. IG (personal interview, March 2002) admitted to prioritising her time and doing most of her dressmaking when the children were at school. She said that her attitude was:

Whatever housework wasn’t done by twelve o’clock didn’t get done until the next day, because that time between lunchtime and when the children came home, was mine. I didn’t take on any more (work) than I could cope with …I was there for my children when they got home.

However, it also appears that the children of the dressmakers were expected to fit in with the work in many cases. The daughters of MF, when in their teens, were expected to do the housework on Saturdays, and MF taught them how to cook, so that she could continue to sew (MF, personal interview, October 2000). Perhaps the greatest sacrifice made by a child to assist his mother’s dressmaking, was that made by MF’s son. After his sisters had grown too big for the task, or left home, he was expected to try on flared skirts and stand on the table, while his mother circled the skirt measuring from the table surface to straighten the hem; a task that his wife in later years reported that he hated.

DB used her daughter as a model, in the absence of a dressmakers’ model or tailors’ dummy. DB insists that her daughter “will tell you that she hardly ever wears a frock because, she said, I was so sick of my mother trying frocks on me” (DB, personal interview, May 2003). DB’s son, for the first twelve months of his life, was taken to the dressmaking classes that DB taught on Monday and Wednesday nights, and settled in to sleep through them. The researcher recalls earning pocket money, from the age of nine or ten, hand sewing hems for the clients of her dressmaker mother when she was facing rapidly approaching deadlines.
The general impression gained from the dressmakers is that husbands and children respected or, at the very least, amiably tolerated the women’s work, and assisted the women in the house or with the work when they were called upon to do so. The inference drawn from this is that the work of the women did not seriously challenge the roles of their husbands as the providers for the family. The women clearly regarded the welfare of the family as their priority. They avoided the conflict that could ensue from the pressure of approaching deadlines, by not accepting more work than they could handle in the time that they were prepared to give to dressmaking. Although the additional income was welcome, in most cases, their production was not led by the need to earn a certain sum. In this practice, the dressmakers were conforming to the standards of the time. The requirement to earn, or the desire to fulfil career ambitions, would not have been expected of them as wives and mothers.

7.1.2 Family Traditions

Close relatives, such as mothers or grandmothers, were role models and first teachers for fourteen of the dressmakers. One dressmaker reported that her mother was a dressmaker; her aunt, a tailoress; and her uncle, a tailor (AM, personal interview, March 2000). Two dressmakers went into business with their aunts, who were already established dressmakers. ZP (personal interview, July 2000), recalls that her maternal grandmother, was a talented person and taught my mother the skills of sewing, knitting, crochet, tatting, and other skills such as poker work and woodcarving. This talented woman also taught English in a girls’ school in Germany before she emigrated to New Zealand in 1902. My mother taught my sister and I to sew, and all the clothing-related skills ... My sister developed her skills in her Diploma of Fine Arts and crafts specialising in metalwork and embroidery, and my interests developed in the designing and construction of clothing. Both of us are trained teachers in our subjects. I have early memories of being allowed to dress up in my grandmother’s clothes, all black silks and jet beaded jackets, with a waist-cinching strong tape inside that was done up and gave me a tummy ache. Red silk lining, buttons and loops or concealed openings, pintuckings and black guipure lace trims. All in delicate condition, and black and white striped satin linings in the sleeves.

ML (personal interview, September 2000) remembers growing up in a small street in Auckland where her mother and three neighbours sewed. Her mother “did beautiful
smocking on babies’ dresses and sold (them) to Smith and Caugheys, Milnes (and) Rendells in the city”. Two neighbours made wedding dresses and another was a tailor. All worked from their homes at that time. ML was an eleven or twelve year old girl in the early 1950s, and was allowed to watch and help them. CM’s family had a long tradition of needlework. She said:

As far as I know, my great-grandmother in Ireland owned a factory where they did all the linen work, hemstitching, bespoke stitching. My grandmother did all the sewing for the royal house. I never met her but I learnt about how hard they had to work. Then my mother, before she came to New Zealand, worked also in the linen factories and she used to tell me how… if she was late for work, they used to close the gate and lock them out. So, quite a number of times, she was locked out. In Ireland, they went there (to the factory) from when they were young people and, from what I can gather, it was mostly Protestant; it was Protestant-oriented. That’s where their children went. From the age of six, they would be sitting, you would see the children sitting on the doorsteps, pulling all the threadwork. They used to pull all the threads in the linen and then the ladies used to sew them.

My mother … came to New Zealand as a domestic, and she was assistant to the cook at Nathan’s, David Nathan, and I heard recently that (his) was the first Jewish wedding (in New Zealand) … And they used to bring all these immigrant girls out to service their home. My aunt, who(m) my mother didn’t know in those days, also worked there and, when she went to work, her name was Gladys and Mrs Nathan asked her her name, and when she said her name was Gladys, (Mrs Nathan) said, “oh goodness me, you can’t be called Gladys. That’s my daughter’s name. You will be called by your second name.” That was a little bit of history about my mother. …

She didn’t sew for quite a number of years and then, when I was about maybe fifteen, someone asked her, seeing that she could hemstitch, if they gave her a hemstitching machine, would she work at home? Oh, first of all, she worked in their factory, and then she worked at home, making these handkerchiefs, men’s handkerchiefs, and she must have made literally thousands and thousands. And we used to cut them, not so much me, but my sister was married and she used to come and cut these handkerchiefs and my mother used to sew them. And she did that until she was seventy-four (CM, personal interview, July 2001).

DL, DB, MP, and JM all have recollections of their mothers’ sewing skills:

Yes, mother made everything for us except shoes – coats, down to our socks. She taught us girls to use the treadle machine and make dolls’ clothes (DL, personal interview, June 2000).

Yes, my mother sewed and her mother sewed before her, and her mother actually worked at Ballyntyynes (where DB later worked) at some stage, but I could never find out when (DB, personal interview, May 2003).

My mother did sewing in Scotland. During our young years and over the Depression years she made all our clothes, boys and girls, fancy dresses and party clothes (MP, personal interview, July 2000).

I don’t remember (my mother) actually taking me and saying this is how it (sewing) is done, but I just caught on. I’m sure I must have been very keen because, when I was four years old, I was using the sewing machine. I put the needle through my finger when I was four. It was one of those treadles and I had to stand and lean against the chair and treadle with one foot. I was so keen to do it. I’m sure that some people are born with that aptitude because my sisters didn’t want to do it but I did. I used to make dolls’ clothes for the rest of them and, from when I was fourteen, I sewed my own clothes. And it just went on from there (JM, personal interview, June 2000).

In contrast, ED’s mother had no sewing skills:
The family came from England, from Manchester or somewhere around there. Yes, they all came, my mother and father and nine children – and me, six weeks later … My mother had four boys first in the family and she couldn’t sew and she couldn’t make boys’ clothes. Then she had seven girls, all one after the other, and she couldn’t sew, she couldn’t make a thing. Just as well my father must have had fairly good positions because the family were all beautifully dressed … I can remember, in my young day, the dressmaker used to come in and sew for the three youngest girls, and I guess that it might have been that dressmaker (who influenced me to sew) because nobody else, none of my other sisters were inclined to be dressmaking (ED, personal interview, June 2001).

Many of the dressmakers conceded that the women in their families sewed because so many women of their era were taught to sew, and often made their own and their children’s clothes through necessity. They could not afford to buy clothes for the entire family or they were living in locations where the opportunities to buy were very limited. It was very common for most women to have reasonable sewing skills. The attributes of thrift and economy had also been instilled in them, therefore they would have been likely to expect that their daughters, the future dressmakers, would learn to sew.

7.1.3 Acquisition of Specialist Skills and Knowledge

Formal apprenticeships or employment with other dressmakers or in small workrooms presented the introduction to sewing commercially for most of the dressmakers. All of the women had developed basic sewing skills as young girls, prior to employment, either from school or from female relatives. Their individual experiences were very diverse and clearly demonstrated a desire to learn and upgrade their skills. Eleven of the dressmakers mentioned taking day and/or evening classes, mainly in patternmaking and occasionally with garment making included, to extend their abilities. Two of the women went to Druleigh College of Dressmaking in Auckland. PF (personal interview, April 2003) recalls,

When I started work, my mother said I’d have to learn and do things for myself because she couldn’t sew … She sent me to Druleigh College (in) Vulcan Lane … and I went every Saturday morning and had lessons and I loved that … (I did that) for two years. We used to make little miniature patterns in coloured cardboard and put them in a book.
Druleigh provided students with the *Druleigh Book of Pattern Cutting and Designing*. This text included instructions on how to take body measurements, clarified with photographs of the process of measurement and with diagrams of the body showing measurement positions. For example, a photograph captioned “Measuring Bust” shows one woman measuring another and instructs, “Place tape over shoulder blades and fullest part in front. Hold tape snugly” (*Druleigh Book of Pattern Cutting and Designing*, circa 1940s/1950s, p.2). Instructions on how to draft “The Foundation Pattern” follow, with the suggestion that, “it is best to use a long piece of brown paper or wallpaper, preferably not less than 30 inches wide and long enough for the frock” (Ibid, p.5). A diagram of the foundation pattern draft (front and back of dress) accompanies the instructions. Examples are included of various dress designs that could be developed from the foundation pattern.

PF actually started her career in millinery, and added dressmaking later in life. She completed a four year millinery apprenticeship in Auckland, having been attracted to it at a young age.

My sister, when I was five, took me to learn dancing and I hated it, and I was forever going into the little sewing room (where) my teacher’s mother was making all the frocks for the tap dancing. And I was in there more times than I was having a lesson and, from that moment on, I wanted to be a milliner … Winding little bits up and making silvery bits for their hair, and that just fascinated me. And then a girl at school left and went to work for her (milliner) aunty in Karangahape Road, and she said, why don’t you come with me, so when I was old enough to leave (school) at fifteen, I went along too. It was the sewing and millinery that (originally) took my eye – I wasn’t interested in dancing; it was an effort (PF, personal interview, April 2003).

MH went to the *Hollywood School of Dressmaking* in Gisborne, following in the footsteps of her dressmaker aunt.

My aunty had done a course with the Hollywood School of Dressmaking for drafting patterns and then she showed me how to draft the patterns and then, after two or three years, I went to the Hollywood School and did a specialist course in sleeves and collars and fancy designs … I just went to night classes because I wasn’t doing the full course. I was only doing the specialist one. They had full courses. They had sewing and pattern drafting … I think it might have been a franchise because you got the specialist rulers, which was part of your course (MH, personal interview, February 2000).

MH’s exercise book of handwritten notes taken during the specialist course, records that pattern drafting followed a system based on the use of special rulers calibrated with various
points scaled to correspond to bust measurements. Handwritten instructions and diagrams for sleeve designs, collar designs, bodice revers, and a pleated skirt are included. Image Thirty-Four (p. 225) presents an example of the rulers used by the Hollywood School of Dressmaking.

The mother of DS had the foresight to encourage her daughter’s interest in dressmaking at a young age, by arranging for her to have lessons in patternmaking.

During my time at home with my mum when I was young, she sent me to a French fashion person and she used to teach you to draft patterns … and she taught me quite a lot about drafting patterns. For a couple of years I went to her once a week after work (DS, personal interview, November 1999).

DS started work at the age of fifteen after attending Wellington Technical College, where she was taught how to make clothes. She recalled that her teacher was very thorough, to the extent of devoting “one whole chapter of her book (to) the care and management of the sewing machine.” DS explained that she gained experience in the workplace by progressively moving from one firm to another:

I just went from one place (to another) where I thought I might get more experience. Most of the places I worked for in Wellington were quite fashionable shops and they had a factory away from the shop. No, not so much a factory (as) a small workroom … There was one called ‘Marie Louise’ in Wellington and I worked for them. I used to do some cutting as well as machining. And then there was one that did dear little dresses, women’s frocks I mean. Very neat, rather nice, appealed to me, called J. and E. Star. They were sisters, and I worked for them. And after that I went on to a place in Lambton Quay in Wellington, and I was in charge of a workroom that did mostly childrenswear, and I did cutting (DS, personal interview, November 1999).

The dressmakers who entered apprenticeships, or started work in small dressmaking businesses, followed a logical programme that systematically developed their expertise. VD (personal interview, July 2000) recalls that, during her four year apprenticeship commencing in 1943:

We started off handsewing for six months, and then you pleated skirts for another six months, and then you machined them I think. You got to the top when you did the bodices, and then the skirt girls gave you the skirts and you sewed the bodices on.
ED, the oldest of the interviewees and ninety-three at the time of interview, remembered the start of her apprenticeship in 1922:

I started off, at fifteen I left school, dying to get to work of course. That was (in) 1922, I started looking for work at fifteen. And, because the first two wouldn’t have suited me, and I saw this one, this factory work in Symonds Street and it was for, you know, to learn tailoring and I thought, that will suit me fine and I got the job. And I worked there as an apprentice. I had to do four years apprenticeship for it. I was taken in, and it was a small factory, run by Jewish people, two brothers, and they had two sons, so the four of them. They gave me to a girl to be her apprentice and she looked like an old lady to me – I thought she was very old – It turned out, later on when I really found out how old she was, she was only about three years older than me (ED, personal interview, June 2001).

CM’s employment started at the age of thirteen:

I went to work for this lady who was a very close friend of my mother, who had no family and (she) and her husband used to work this very very successful factory … So, although I used to work there, I could not be on the machines until I was fourteen … (It was) 1943, so we were right in the middle of the war. I had to sit on the finishing table where I did all the handsewing and, of course, all I wanted to do was get on to those machines, but I don’t think they’d let me until I was about fifteen. But I did all the finishing of the coats. We did coats only, in those days, all ladies’ coats. But then she had to go on to war work and so most of the things that were done were the ladies’ uniforms. They did very nice uniforms; all the WAACs’ uniforms …

Working in the factories, we had to supply our own scissors and all our rulers and tape (measures) and everything … The scissor man, as we used to call him, used to come around I suppose about once every six weeks and we used to pay to have our scissors sharpened … We had morning and afternoon tea. The machines went off dead on the time and they went on (again) ten minutes later, and lunchtime, half an hour later. There was no two minutes after that, or two minutes before … I want to add that we never got any sick pay at all, no sick pay in those days. I can remember going to work feeling absolutely ghastly with the flu’, but you did not get paid for anything; any time that you were off you never got paid. You only got paid for when you went to work and when you were there, the eight hours and six days or whatever. In those days the employer really had all the say … So it wasn’t an easy life but it was the only life we knew and, I forgot to say that the apprenticeship was for three years and three months and, at the end of it, we earned three pounds (per week) (CM, personal interview, July 2001).

DB started working for Ballyntynes department store in Christchurch in 1933. Her apprenticeship began in the childrenswear workroom under a woman called Freda Southern.

DB talked about the first stages of her apprenticeship and the skills acquired:

And I had to pick up pins off the floor at quarter to five and, if anything had to be ironed – because there were no steam irons in those days – and you had the bucket with cold water in it and you had to (fill) the bucket; that was the apprentice’s job. And you had to go downstairs and get cottons and domes and things and do the running around. You learned to pin up a hem, and to have it all nice and even, and you learned to sew that by hand, and you sewed the buttons and domes on. But I never did any machining for her at all. We only had one machine and she did it. I don’t think I did any machining for about eighteen months … I progressed (and kept learning). I was on the table and learned to do all the handsewing – hems and all the finishing part of them. You had apprentices work for you. And then I got that I was allowed to do a wee bit of cutting … and then they decided that I could be a cutter. But I had to pay them to learn to cut! I had to pay to be taught cutting in the workroom in my own time in the lunch hour. And of course, I had to buy all my own scissors, which I’ve still got, all my own scissors. And then, when I sort of got on to the cutting, I got up a bit further, and I was taught how to go out to the fitting rooms and meet the customers and do their fittings, and take measurements. So, I’ve really learnt it right from the ground floor upwards (DB, personal interview, May 2003).
MP’s apprenticeship was served in the tailoring trade:

My tailoring years were for a small shop in orders for monied farmers and their families. (In) those days it was a status thing to have your clothes tailor-made. The Scottish owner did the cutting of all garments from kilts, riding gear, coats, jackets, (and) skirts. There were three men tailors whose parents had to pay for them to learn the trade in their day. There (were) about ten young ladies and we did a six year apprenticeship on a starting wage of one pound, four and threepence … I made trousers and slacks for my original boss, then developed into dressmaking. I preferred the lighter fabrics and changing styles … Though I did learn a lot about good quality fabrics from my tailoring days as all our cloth was imported from Scotland, beautiful wool tweeds, serge and tartans. Wanganui back then had a very good woollen mill and made great quality fabrics and clothing (MP, personal interview, July 2000).

Tailoring techniques also featured in IG’s apprenticeship:

I worked in Hamilton for a Madame Snowdon. She was a Scottish lady … a tailoress and dressmaker. I loved the tailoring side of it, and it was at the time when there were pleats and fan pleats and we used to embroider arrows over the pleats. And there (were) either straight pockets or slant pockets or curved pockets and, at the end of each one, there was an embroidered arrow. This would be the mid to late 30s. And then there was faggoting and rouleaux work and all that sort of thing … She was old-fashioned … I heard two or three years ago, (about) a new method of using a calico bodice to fit. It’s not new at all, because she was using it way back then. And she’d have say a (size) thirty-two, a thirty-four, and a thirty-six, and she’d fit this on the (client) and then put pins into the centre part and then the rest was all pinned as it fitted that person. And then we’d have to trace each one – blue would be for Mrs So and So, red for Mrs So and So; and that’s how she cut out her work. But she was old-fashioned, but good.

And I left her and went to two lovely ladies who were as modern as the minute. One sister was serious and the other one was bright and happy, and they used to make their garments in the back and put them in the shop, and the happy one used to sell them. (Their) dad used to come in and look after the machines (IG, personal interview, March 2002).

ML entered a dressmaking apprenticeship by chance. She left school aged fifteen with the intention of becoming a nurse. However, she had to be eighteen to start nursing training, so the dressmaking apprenticeship was initially a way of filling in the intervening three years:

I did an apprenticeship with Alice Thomas in (the) Vulcan Buildings in Auckland, 1954, ’55, and ’56. I was her last apprentice. We sewed for Lady Norrie, the Governor General’s wife, Lady Lloyd-Jones and many other “big” names, but we in the workroom never saw these people, who were fitted by Alice on the floor above. I spent my first year making belts and shoulder pads, purchasing linings and “notions” all over the city, and should have been put off sewing for life. I managed to get a machine needle through my finger on my first day! Coming from a Singer treadle to an industrial was too much to cope with … Every Friday, during my apprenticeship, all the fine steel pins were left in Fullers Earth powder over the weekend and then cleaned by me on Monday mornings (ML, personal interview, September 2000).

JSM was the youngest dressmaker interviewed and, therefore, did not commence her apprenticeship until the 1960s:

I started (at Austin Browns in November) 1962. I worked as a hand finisher, which they don’t really … It’s a foreign word these days. We had very interesting garments to do in those days. I worked with this one particular lady and we made these coats for a place in Wellington. They were very expensive … in those days, one pound, one shilling and eightpence was the weekly apprenticeship wage, and we did these coats and they were thirty-five pounds. That was a lot of money. And all the buttons were hand done. Linings were sewn in, but we had to put interfacing on – cross stitch it all on – and even the labels; either
side was sewn by machine, but we had to cross stitch the labels, the top and the bottom. And then you
had to tack your hem up and cross stitch, and all the linings were done by hand – the bottoms of the hems
and linings.

I’ll never forget. I was trusted this day to cut this lining and I forgot to pin it to get the (pleat), and I cut it
too short. I suppose by a quarter inch, because it had to have the pleat over it and it was expensive lining;
satin. (Each lining was cut individually). I never ever made that mistake twice.

We weren’t a big, big company. We were perhaps a staff of thirty, but it was never a great big company
like some of the firms … Way back, we use to do this one garment, and it had a band around it, and it had
a yoke, and on the yoke it had a Dior rose. Well, the band had to be blindstitched by hand, and these
roses had to be made up … we reckon every woman in the country must have had half a dozen of them.
We put them out in their hundreds. It was an older ladies’ style coat and there were hundreds of them. I
was a supervisor (and) at one stage there I had to check all the garments and they never liked me for that
because I sent stuff back. I had never been a machinist at that stage – you sort of didn’t know the
difficulties that the girls (faced). So I was basically self taught (at machining). I used to just watch the
others (JSM, personal interview, May 2003).

It is worth noting that if a desire to study to be a designer had occurred to any of the
dressmakers, this desire could not be met at this time. Fashion design courses were not
available in New Zealand until the late 1960s, and then only in one location (at Auckland
Technical Institute) and with a very limited number of students.

7.1.4 Reasons For Dressmaking and Acquisition of Clients

For many of the dressmakers, making the decision to establish a dressmaking enterprise at
home occurred following marriage and the birth of children, which brought an end to their
work outside the home. Only one dressmaker worked from home as a dressmaker prior to her
marriage. When she first left school at the age of fifteen, she worked for a short period of
time for a small lingerie business in Peel Street, Gisborne.

Just a small shop; a husband and wife and another machinist there. They used to make nightgowns and
underwear and bedjackets and negligees. The tops used to be all quilted, made out of soft satin, and that
was where I learned to do quilting. But I was only there about two and a half months. I felt that there
wasn’t any future in it, so that was when I went home and started sewing with my aunty (MH, personal
interview, February 2000).

ZP expressed quite unique reasons for choosing to dressmake at home, including a desire for
some financial independence and a desire to direct her own work:

The thirties were tough times financially and women did not have independence. Many women had to
ask for every penny that was spent and many times father would make mistakes with filling in the weekly
cheques and mother was put to unnecessary inconvenience because of this. As a youngster I witnessed
this and I made a vow to myself that I would not be subjected to this when I was married. I have been blessed with the most supportive and tolerant husband one could have...I chose to work at home because of the basic convenience of the system and, I am a loner, I enjoy my own company (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).

The most common reasons that led the dressmakers to working at home, however, were to have some extra income, to utilise their expertise, and because someone had asked them to make something for them. For example, AM said:

When I got married, I decided, having kids, I was going to stay at home and I just stayed at home with the children and decided to work at home. Since I could dressmake, I decided to use the expertise and stay at home and work (AM, personal interview, March 2000).

The overwhelming impression gained was that most of the dressmakers did not have to work. Making an income was essential for only three of them; one who was widowed when her child was ten; one whose husband was bedridden due to illness for several years before he died; and a third whose husband was on a very low income for a period of time. MH described her motivations as follows:

We had been on a farm in Port Waikato for two years, and we came back to Gisborne and we built our house in Grafton Road. Our daughter was only two and a half or three, and a (dressmaking) was a way of being at home with her, because you didn’t go out to work in those days. And I just carried on from where I’d left off a couple of years before. It added to the family income because my husband was working with a farm machinery business and, a couple of years after that, he bought it and took it over and was running that, and I just carried on sewing. When my daughter was ten, my husband died suddenly, and I just carried on sewing (MH, personal interview, February 2000).

Only one dressmaker mentioned the desire to be creative and that, for her, this drive was “a very strong natural passion” (ZP, personal interview, July 2000). The long hours worked by the dressmakers for so many years, suggest that it is unlikely that they would have continued the work, if the income had not been essential, and if they had not also enjoyed the opportunity to create. There is no doubt that the dressmakers had a claim towards creativity, if not in actual design terms then certainly in the urge to manipulate fabric around the body. The human body is a very complex form to shape and fit, and the dressmakers demonstrated the art and craft of clothing the body in a masterly fashion. They were confident of their skills to cut and shape, and proud of the outcomes.
For most of the dressmakers, the process of acquiring their first clients was not a planned exercise. Their businesses developed slowly and their first clients were frequently friends or family. When asked how she attracted her first clients, MH (personal interview, February 2000) said, “It was probably through my aunty because, as she slowly gave (dressmaking) up, her clients ended up with me, and then their friends, and their friends”.

AM recalled that her client numbers grew by word of mouth. “I think I just made for friends to start with and then somebody asked them where they’d got it from, so they said me, and they came back (too)” (AM, personal interview, March 2000). DL (personal interview, June 2000) said, “my neighbour asked if I’d make clothes necessary for her daughter to go away to boarding school, and alter others. She had two daughters who went away and needed special house frocks”.

According to ML (personal interview, September 2000), “it was my sister-in-law. I think she was feeling a wee bit sorry for me. She knew that I was struggling financially and, although she sewed beautifully herself, she had me make her a dress”. When asked how she acquired her first clients, DB said:

I have no idea. I used to have the machine sitting there (in a corner of the dining room) and I made, I suppose, three-quarters of the dresses for the girls in the bowling club, when they wanted a new dress and, yes, by word of mouth you got to make wedding frocks. Mrs Barnett was our organist at church and she said that … her son was getting married; would I make (the bride’s) wedding frock? I said, oh yes, I’ll do that. So I made that and that’s where it really started from (DB, personal interview, May 2003).

According to ZP, she:

… started with my own wedding in late 1952, then my sister’s in 1956, then many local girls … who came to look at the wedding asked me to do theirs, and people talked and off I went. For many years clients had to wait for two years to get a booking. They didn’t seem to mind; people had long engagements and were quite prepared to wait (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).

One of the dressmakers left her employment in a tailoring company, to set up her own enterprise after she had built up a small clientele after hours.

I used to do a lot of work at home for friends and for people and I was starting to do anything then…So I left Robinsons then. I got myself a room in the Strand Arcade, upstairs, and it was very cheap and overlooked into Queen Street, and I started up in the business for myself. I was there for about four or five years … I was married in 1937 … then the (Second World) War came on and everybody that was capable of holding a needle was wanted for uniforms and stuff … I was working all during the war.
anyway, and when I started here, to start at home properly, would have been when I came into this house; 1945. After 1945, and from there on, I was doing (dressmaking) at home and then, of course, when I really decided to start at home was when I decided I was going to have a baby. And that was when I thought I can’t go out to work and have a baby too, so that settled it (ED, personal interview, June 2001).

One dressmaker began her dressmaking enterprise with a more developed plan to attract clients.

When I began at home…I just let it be known that I was prepared to do winter skirts at that stage. I said I’d do them for ten dollars. They had to be plain and straight but they could be lined. And, I think I got about a dozen that year (JA, personal interview, October 2000).

She had loved sewing from when she was a child, and had made her own clothes and clothes for friends as a teenager. She excelled at sewing at school and entered local dressmaking competitions then and as a young woman working in other fields. By the time she chose to make her living as a dressmaker, she was well-known for her sewing expertise.

Even though the dressmaking businesses evolved very gradually, once established, many of the dressmakers continued to sew for clients for many years, suggesting that the work was very satisfying for them. Ten of the dressmakers sewed for over forty years, including six who surpassed fifty years; four who sewed for more than sixty years; and ED who, remarkably, was a tailor and dressmaker for seventy-three years, retiring at the age of eighty-eight. Only two of the dressmakers worked less than twenty years in the occupation, but still devoted fourteen and fifteen years to their craft. Again this dedication to their trade suggests that their desire to create, and the satisfaction gained from seeing the end result, was a prime motivator for continuing to sew. The impression was also gained that the dressmakers felt that they were providing a service. Clients required clothing to meet particular needs and the dressmakers were able to fulfil those needs. The Depression and war years had created an environment where one helped one’s neighbour, and a strong sense of community prevailed with most women at home in the suburbs during the day. If a woman could use her skills and talents to help another woman, it was very likely that she would do so.
7.2 PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

7.2.1 Business Establishment, Promotion and Resourcing

The businesses operated by the interviewed dressmakers were predominately home-based enterprises. Only four of the women maintained business premises outside the home, and then only for relatively short periods of time, in proportion to the entire span of their dressmaking activities. JM (personal interview, June 2000) said:

We had a workroom upstairs in the shopping centre (in Levin) and we used to have people come with their own materials, and they’d pick out a design of what they wanted and we’d make it. (My aunt) had her customers and I had mine. Funnily enough, it worked out like that. We shared the workroom and had our own sewing machines and we each had our own customers.

MF operated her own business in rented rooms in Timaru from approximately 1927 to 1935, when she married and moved from Timaru. ML owned a small drapery business in Tauranga and sewed at the back of the shop. The business sold fabrics, haberdashery, and some purchased garments. ML supplemented these with ready to wear children’s clothing, nightwear, and raincoats that she made herself (personal interview, September 2000). JA also owned a drapery business, a “sewing shop” as she called it, for nearly ten years in suburban Wanganui. The shop contained a retail area and a workroom, where JA made or altered garments for clients. Her decision to close the shop was made at the point where the income from the retail side was no longer sufficient to cover the rent of the premises. She calculated then that it would be more financially viable to continue dressmaking from her home (JA, personal interview, October 2000).

In virtually every instance, the dressmakers set up in business by accepting orders for work that they carried out using the sewing machines and equipment that they already had in their homes. Their first workroom was the dining room, living room, or kitchen of the house and, occasionally, all three, with fittings conducted in a bedroom. Only one dressmaker had the luxury of a separate room adapted for the purposes of dressmaking immediately. Six other
dressmakers were able to enjoy purpose-built or purpose-adapted rooms in or attached to their houses in later years of their careers. ZP’s account of her workroom arrangements provides a very descriptive record of the way that she worked:

At first all clothing was cut out on the lounge floor, on hands and knees, where I would simultaneously do my Mary McLean pre-natal exercises. These were a superb assistance during child birth having prepared the area for easy quick child birth. All my marking and the construction was done on the kitchen table, and fittings were done in the living-lounge. Many was the night when my husband would arrive in soon after fittings, only for me to find out he had been waiting outside in the freezing cold, because he had to come in through this room to enter. It was many years before he admitted this uncomfortable situation. Everything had to be kept hanging and covered in the bedroom and cleared away and brought out each time. Later we moved and I had a beautiful room with bench and storage, and the room altered to have French doors to the back terrace and overlooking a quarter acre garden. It was a beautifully sunny room and had its own entry from outside, sheer bliss to work in. Later we moved to a large villa and I had a large front room, beautifully appointed. By this time my teaching hours had increased and this space was being used for pattern drafting and cutting for teaching preparation (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).

There was no formal promotion of any of the businesses. None of the dressmakers ever advertised their services and many remarked that they never needed to because they were always so busy. Most clients were attracted by endorsement from existing clients. Some dressmakers mentioned that clients were occasionally referred to them by the local fabric and drapery shops. Dressmaker AM commented:

I also (in addition to word of mouth referrals) have my name with Mary Toye Fabrics and Spotlight Fabrics, but I’ve never actually advertised in the newspapers. But I do get quite a few people from these places and, of course, I make something for them, then their friends ask them (who made it) so it just grows by word of mouth, but not actual advertising in the newspaper (AM, personal interview, March 2000).

Most of the businesses required few additional resources to set up. The dressmakers could begin, and most did, with a domestic machine, a domestic iron and ironing board, and the kitchen or dining room table. As JM said (personal interview, June 2000), “you had very little expense to start off with”. Several dressmakers later upgraded their machines to heavier domestic models or industrial models, and purchased an overlocker for finishing seams and edges. Seven of the dressmakers eventually acquired professional cutting tables. Dressmakers’ stands or tailors’ dummies do not appear to have been essential to the women.
Fittings and adjustments were performed directly on the client. PF told an amusing story about attempting to make her own tailors’ dummy:

I tried those old ones in the Druleigh days … there was a pack you could buy and it was a big wide sticky tape, brown sort of sticky tape you put on parcels, and it was sort of like a shellac glue on it, and you put this sort of cheesecloth singlet on, and you stood there and someone went round you and wound you up like a mummy, until they covered you completely. When it had set, they cut you up the front - no, up the back it was, and pulled it off and this awful looking shape was there. As the damp weather came in winter, it used to sort of collapse. It wasn’t very successful (PF, personal interview, April 2003).

The dressmakers did not spend a lot of money on fashion magazines or pattern books, relying on clients to bring their own representations of the designs they wanted. The most popular titles for the seven dressmakers who did occasionally buy or subscribe to fashion magazines were Vanity Fair, Vogue, L’Officiel, and Marie Claire, all high fashion publications. One dressmaker mentioned buying bridal magazines and another purchased the Vogue pattern catalogues, sold by the fabric store after they had received a newer edition of the catalogue.

I always kept Australian Home Journal catalogues and old Simplicity books that some looked through. Often they took skirts from one design and tops from another and I drafted the rest (DL, personal interview, June 2000).

Just Vogue. I’d just buy the last Vogue, the pattern catalogue that’s been out at Mary Toyes. Mine are usually a bit out-of-date. When they get the new ones in, they sell the old one (VD, personal interview, July 2000).

Vanity Fair and L’Officiel – I still have a pile of those L’Officiels packed away in a wardrobe of my workroom (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).

I’d buy (a magazine) now and again but mostly people brought their own. As I say, I’d have the odd one I’d get now and again – Vanity Fair or a Vogue. They were the main fashion magazines. Some months they’d be full of advertising and they wouldn’t have any designs in worth looking at. Another time you’d get them and they’d be all pictures, so we would go through those. The girls used to bring their own bride books (MH, personal interview, February 2000).

I didn’t subscribe but I did buy a lot of wedding books, whenever a new wedding book came out in the shops, and I’d say I had quite a few of those, that people could look through, get ideas, whatever (PF, personal interview, April 2003).

I don’t think I bought many. A lot of clients would bring them and some would leave them with me, so I ended up with a collection. Those fashion magazines were always every expensive (ML, personal interview, September 2000). The only ones I really used to buy was one brought out for bigger women, and I started buying that – (it was called) Bella (JSM, personal interview, May 2003).

The dressmakers were not required to hold stocks of fabric because they expected their clients to bring their own. Occasionally clients were directed to purchase linings and haberdashery but, more commonly, the dressmaker purchased what was required for each garment from local retailers and passed the cost on to the client.
7.2.2 Business Operation

The procedure for accepting a new commission generally followed one of two processes. The client would visit the dressmaker with a sketch or picture of the design that she wanted, and receive advice on suitable fabrics and the quantity of fabric required. Alternatively, the client would arrive with a picture or the pattern, and the fabric already purchased.

MH and the researcher clearly recall the process of creating new garments. The client would arrange a time for a consultation and usually arrive with fabrics already purchased and some idea of the type of garments required. The client might provide dress patterns or pictures from a magazine or, more rarely, a sketch of the desired design. If this was not the case, MH would suggest designs, occasionally by showing garments from her own wardrobe or that of her daughter, and suggesting variations. MH would sometimes make rough sketches or, merely, quick notes, such as, “short sleeve, straight skirt, drape lined with green, top like mine” (Measurement Book, collection of J. Hamon).

Measurements were taken for a new client, or checked for an existing client, and recorded in a school exercise book. Any changes in the measurements of an existing client were noted; there were commiserations over weight gains and diets were discussed. MH recorded measurements in inches and always followed the same format. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bust</th>
<th>39½</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>waist</td>
<td>28½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hip</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seat</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Queen</td>
<td>Dn fr. 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Length 41½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>4 front 14½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 back 17½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>armhole 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Dn fr” is the measurement from the front neck to the waist. The unidentified measurement on the left is a neck measurement. “4 front” and “6 back” refer to measurements taken from
armhole to armhole across the front and back respectively. MH’s measurement book can be seen in Image Thirty-Five (p. 226).

At some stage, usually on Friday mornings, a trip would be made to the retailers in the town for the purpose of purchasing requirements such as lining and interfacing fabrics, matching threads and zips, and for the selection of just the right buttons. Covered buttons and self-fabric belts, fashionable in the 1950s and 1960s, especially with older women, were taken to the appropriate retailer for making, to be collected at a later date. Unless the pressure of work did not allow it, the Friday morning visit to town was also a social occasion with MH accompanied by her two aunts.

Garments were cut and sewn together to a fitting stage. MH never made toiles, having the confidence to cut directly into the main fabric. Generous seam allowances were cut, particularly on side seams, to allow for adjustments. Two fittings were the norm (other than for complex wedding gowns, where more might be required); the first to check the fit and gain client approval, and the second to check any additional items, such as the pitch and length of a sleeve, and to measure the hem. Hems were straightened by using a ruler to measure up from the floor and inserting a line of pins at the desired length. MH sat on the floor while the client shuffled around in a circle as directed. The instruction “round again” would be repeated many times during the measuring up of the hem of a circular skirt.

Consultations for bridal groups would often include the bride and all the bridesmaids, and could last for an hour or two. The bride generally attended all the fittings. Strategies were put in place for contending with any bridesmaids who were arriving in the town only days before the wedding, a fairly common occurrence. MH preferred to work whatever hours were
necessary to make all the gowns, rather than have any made by dressmakers in other locations. In her opinion, their standards of fit and construction usually were not as high as her own. She also feared that wedding photographs would show obvious different hem levels of the garments, if she hadn’t personally measured them all to finish at the same distance above the ground.

Finished garments were pressed to perfection and placed on hangers awaiting collection by the client. Rather than hanging in a wardrobe, the garments were hung from doors and doorways around the house. Usable off-cuts of fabric, spare buttons and other items belonging to the client, such as patterns, were returned at the time of collection. Garments were taken off the hanger and folded carefully over the client’s arm for removal, generally to be placed carefully along the back seat of the car. Wedding gowns and ballgowns were transported in bed sheets. The sheet was spread on the lounge floor, the gowns were laid on to the sheet, with the long sides folded over to encase the gowns. The whole package was then carried to the car by two people, as if carrying a stretcher, and laid along the back seat. MH would frequently deliver wedding gowns herself on the wedding day, having arranged to assist the bride and bridesmaids to dress.

Consultations took place in the lounge or at the dining room table. Garments were cut on the dining room table, with the table’s extensions pulled out to full length. The work was constructed in the sewing room, a room added to the house a few years after the family had moved in. Fittings were conducted in the lounge, with a full-length mirror propped up on a dining room chair (MH, personal interview, February 2000).

The dressmakers priced work either by the hour or by the garment, with no apparent formal costing process applied. No consideration appears to have been given to overheads such as
use of the home space, use of electricity, and depreciation of equipment and facilities.

However, nearly half of the dressmakers paid tax on their earnings so presumably their accountants recognised these factors, if indeed they used accountants. Thirteen of the eighteen dressmakers charged by the garment, but tended to add on an extra sum, calculated on an hourly rate, for additional work. MH (personal interview, February 2000) commented, “with wedding garments, if there was a lot of work in them, it was a combination of both, (with an) hourly charge for the likes of beading and trimming”. DB (personal interview, May 2003) said, “you knew the value of your work and you knew exactly how long it should take you. But I didn’t ever give an exact price. I gave sort of two prices - within that range”.

There seemed to be very few difficulties in receiving payment for the work. Eight of the dressmakers recalled never having any problems with clients; the remaining ten remembered one or two clients who were reluctant to pay. The dressmakers worked on the principle that the garments did not leave their premises until they had been paid for the work. However, occasionally problems occurred and recovery strategies had to be developed. DB had put hours of work into six bridesmaids’ dresses, four adults and two junior bridesmaids featuring the same ornate pintucked design. She charged a similar sum for the adult and the junior garments.

I know I charged twelve pounds for the junior bridesmaids’ frocks. Well, did the mother go to market! Too expensive. And yet, they were as tall as the bridesmaids. So, I kept them! I didn’t let them go. No, they weren’t going to pay so I didn’t let them go. None of them, and the wedding was at six o’clock on the Friday night and they collected them at three o’clock on the Friday afternoon - with the money (DB, personal interview, May 2003).

MH had good luck to thank for recovering her only bad debt.

I only ever had one customer like that - a religious lady who moved away from the district and we ran into her in Lower Hutt one day and she said she hadn’t sent the money because they had had hard times with shifting and one thing and another. But, both she and her daughter were wearing new coats, so...I wrote to her husband, and my accountant had said he would send him a letter if I didn’t hear from him, so I posted a letter to the husband and got a cheque back in the next mail (MH, personal interview, February 2000).

PF recalled the patronising attitude of some of her clients when it came to paying for the
work.

Lots of ladies wanted hems altered or skirts let out, or elastic put in (waists) and things like that, and it was just real casual work, and all those ladies were very nice and they’d pass you a big note for you to give them some change, if you know what I mean. This one particular lady, when I took (the work) around, she said, “oh, you’re charging?” And I said “yes”, and she said, “Oh well, you will have to wait a minute”. And she shut the door and I stood outside and I could hear rattle, rattle, and she must have gone through every jar in the house, and she came out with five cents and ten cents and she got to the three dollars fifty I think I charged her for doing the hem and putting some elastic in a skirt. It wasn’t much and I didn’t really want to do it … and she begrudged it. And another one gave me a nice smile and patted me on the head. I just had to say, well that’s four dollars please, and I felt terrible. I’d never make a living but they get their money’s worth (PF, personal interview, April 2003).

AM remembered having a problem with one of her clients, the wife of the United States ambassador, at the time.

She was going back to the States and I made this suit for her; gorgeous suit in a wool … She came and picked it up and tried it on. Fabulous. Marvellous … She rang me up the next day and tore a strip off me. I said, “What’s wrong?” “Oh”, she said, “I got home, put it on and showed it to my husband and he said, oh that’s disgusting, look at this and look at that.” (I suggested to her to) take it down to the drycleaners and just ask them to press it … She wasn’t going to pay … I think she’d paid so much, that’s right, and then when this happened she said (that she wasn’t going to) pay the rest … And I said, “Well, what’s wrong?”

The women went on to tell AM that her husband thought that the collar was not sitting flat.

However, she went to AM the following day, apologised, and gave her the balance of the money. AM never received an explanation for the earlier dissatisfaction (AM, personal interview, March 2000).

Friends occasionally caused problems for some of the dressmakers when it came to payment for work:

A lot took me as a friend obliging them and expected low charges. One always wanted to pay by giving me pieces of useless materials … I did do the odd alteration or mending until I had a client bring in a split trouser seam “because you’ll have white cotton on your machine”, which of course I didn’t. Anyhow I did it and had to open the leg crotch seam to sew up the split one – whole job took about fifteen minutes. I didn’t charge for it so, next visit, along comes more mending so that time I charged and what an indignant woman when she saw the account itemised with “mending” on it (DL, personal interview, June 2000).

One lady (who) was a very notable person in Auckland, owed me a fair bit, but she was a friend because she supplied my (musical) accompaniments as well, so I didn’t like to ask her for it. But she did owe me a lot of money … During the Depression, my husband was on the buses before he was ill, and (a friend) swore to me that she gave (the money) to (my husband) … and she never at all, because he would have given it to me of course, but she owed it to me for months and months, but she kept on saying that she gave it to him (ED, personal interview, June 2001).
Few of the dressmakers elaborated on the process of paying tax, or not, on their earnings, apart from JM who provided details about paying tax in the 1930s.

We had to keep a record of takings for each month and subtract expenses and then buy stamps to the value of the earnings from the Post Office and stick the stamps to a page of earnings (in) an earnings book. We were never audited but there was the possibility of a tax inspection. You didn’t have to put in a tax return. It was the equivalent of one and sixpence in the (one) pound after the Labour government came in in 1935. That’s what everyone paid as income tax (JM, personal interview, June 2000).

Honesty and a fear of getting caught motivated others to declare their earnings for tax purpose, once their dressmaking was established.

Yes, I did pay tax. I am registered and I do pay tax. When I first started, I don’t think I did … Then I thought, well if somebody suddenly decides to go to the tax man and say, well Mrs M … is sewing at home, she’s making a business of it, I could have been lumbered with a hell of a lot of back tax, so I thought the easiest way is to pay the tax … because I didn’t want to get caught (AM, personal interview, March 2000).

Yes, I did (pay tax), after the first probably eighteen months. The first eighteen months I think I was just making a little bit of pin money … I always said that if the tax man came to my door, I would not have turned a hair because I’ve always been so damned honest with the tax man (ML, personal interview, September 2000).

As my husband was in business, I kept my annual earnings within our tax allowance (MP, personal interview, July 2000).

Once I was established and was making what I considered enough to be paying tax, I decided to for peace of mind. I asked my husband’s accountant to do this for me; it was a good decision (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).

When considering the long hours that many of the dressmakers worked, often over many years, it is likely that good incomes were made. The hours worked ranged from four hours per day up to fifteen hours, with weekend work occasionally added to this. Several of the women mentioned that they enjoyed the peace and quiet of working at night; others worked the hours that their children were at school, although those hours generally increased after the children had left school. MH described the pattern of her working day:

Well, what I’d usually do was cut out at night after tea then I would do some machining, maybe ‘til midnight. The next morning, I would put the ones together that I had cut out the night before. The client would come for a fitting early afternoon then, some days, I would go out and I’d just catch up again at night. But most nights I sewed until midnight… some days could be fifteen (hours), another day might be only four … One Christmas I had three wedding dresses and eight bridesmaids’ dresses to do. I worked Christmas Day and had Boxing Day off. I still went out for Christmas dinner. And, if there was a wedding or something on and I was going out with some friends, I’d come home at midnight or one o’clock in the morning and cut the dress out ready for a fitting the next day – go to bed at four or five o’clock in the morning.
When asked if she worked at weekends, she replied:

Not always. It depends what was in the offing. But if we wanted to do anything, it never really stopped us. I’d just make it up later (MH, personal interview, February 2000).

ZP recalled that her working hours could vary depending on bookings, but they frequently seemed to be long:

I could work twelve hours a day very regularly. The fool that I was worked incredible hours; far too long. I really don’t know how I fitted it all in. Doing the family ironing after teaching at night school so that the next day would be free to devote to clients, or I would need to go shopping for their haberdashery because they did not bring it… In all the years I did not let anyone down, but many times I (went) very, very late in the morning to bed, as well as (having) a very aching body. In each case I was working on a current wedding the night that each of our daughters was born; it was fourteen days rest in St Helens and then home to cope. Oh God, the responsibility … I thought that the news that I was pregnant would let me off the hook (but) the orders still poured in, and for dresses and suits I would have to ask, “do you want this or do you really need this?” (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).

During this period, it was still relatively unusual for women to own their own businesses, so it is not surprising that there appears to have been no apparent services to support their business development. The establishment of a dressmaking business required very little financial outlay, making it an attractive business for a woman to set up. It was extremely unlikely that a woman could obtain financing from a bank to resource a business in her own name, although she might have been able to do so in her husband’s name.

7.2.3 Application of Specialist Skills and Techniques

The dressmakers spoke about their strategies for contending with difficult figure types or complicated design requests. ZP said:

I was often asked what it was like to make a garment for a client that you knew was not going to suit them. This never really happened as careful measuring and sensible flattering pattern cutting eliminates this and produces a garment that the client feels good in. My advice was always taken when asked for, but I always waited to be asked, to the point of preparing an alternative for the first fitting (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).

JM considered that her years of dressmaking experience prepared her for making adjustments for unusual figures:

I remember that there was one little girl who had polio as a child, and she would have been a teenager by this time, and she had a very badly shaped back. She couldn’t buy clothes ready-made because they just didn’t fit at all. And this little girl had to have shoulder seams (that made) provision for her rounded back
because, if she didn’t, all the clothes pulled up on her back and looked dreadful. I made them to fit her. Then there were other (clients) who were short-waisted and big in the hips and narrow shoulders, and they had to have their shoulder seams or sleeve line in a different way, because they were very fitted clothes in those days … if you didn’t have the sleeves set in properly, it was a sin. Although there were some fashions that had gathered (sleeve heads) and they were easy. If you had a straight sleeve and a person who didn’t have the right-shaped shoulder, oh it was hard to get their sleeve set in without it looking pleated where it shouldn’t be …

I don’t think (I ever made a sample first). Well, you see, you fitted the person. You didn’t just take measurements and sew them up. I never did, at any rate. I fitted it, but I always allowed fabric over and above the (usual seam allowance) so that I would have that to come and go on. You know, across the shoulders for instance, or down the side seams, you’d always allow more than the pattern would say to allow and then you’d just fit it (on the person) … Nearly always two ( fittings), because you tried it on the first time and you pinned it all up, and then you would sew that and have them come back again (for a second fitting) before you finished it off (JM, personal interview, June 2000).

IG had been taught a method of blending the use of a pattern, with making pattern adjustments directly on to the fabric when cutting:

I used to do my own (patterns). I don’t know if I even had a pattern. We were told that you took the measurements so that you could run your finger under the tape, and then you added two inches on to that, ‘to live in’ we were told; two inches to live in. And those two inches were put on the front, so I just worked on that principle. And then, we used to put the dart in the material and put this pattern over it, if you see what I mean. But then I got lazy, and I found later, as I got older, I liked to have a pattern (IG, personal interview, March 2002).

A basic pattern was the only requirement of DS, to enable her to cut most styles:

I had one pattern; a basic one that had a collar and revers and a plain skirt, and I designed or cut all my clothes for everyone from that. That was my basic pattern. I didn’t do that myself; I bought that. Generally, I adapted it because I was quite bright in that sort of respect – well, you didn’t have to be bright, just to have a good knowledge of construction. It was often common sense (DS, personal interview, November 1999).

The dressmakers often applied ‘common sense’ solutions to construction problems too:

You cut the whole garment out, and you could run it together. You could always machine the darts in properly and tack the pleats in properly, and always fitted it with pleats tacked in. But you fitted the whole garment because the skirt held the bodice in place and the sleeves held the shoulders in place (DB, personal interview, May 2003).

(In my early years of dressmaking) I had a dress hanging (up) and (my daughter) came home and I said that I had a frill to put on it – it was a chiffon dress – and she said, how are you going to do that? And I said, well look, I just have a look at it and then I go away and have a coronary … But it was something that was going to be an awful job to do, for me (as a tailor). A dressmaker would have done it easy. They’re the differences, you see. But I had two or three friends who were very very exclusive dressmakers, very exclusive indeed, and one of them worked for Smith and Caugheys, and the other was a cutter, and designer eventually, for David Jones in Sydney … I learnt an awful lot from them; a lot of tips from them. A lot of things I learnt from them in the dressmaking line, which they did in the tailoring line from me (ED, personal interview, June 2001).

I remember doing an evening dress for Mrs Black at one time. She brought this picture in, and it had colours in the skirt – panels. It was a tulle skirt, about three layers of tulle in the skirt and a bodice, and we couldn’t get the tulle colours so we dyed them. We used cold tea, and some dip dye for the darker one. It was brown and coffee and cream (MH, personal interview, February 2000).
Pattern companies and the suppliers of fabrics and interfacings published material that was
designed to assist and advise dressmakers on how to achieve a perfect result; examples of
these are shown in Image Thirty-Six (p. 227).

7.3 INVOLVEMENT IN ‘FASHION’-RELATED ACTIVITIES

7.3.1 Competition

The long hours that the dressmakers worked, indicates that there was a large amount of work
available to them, and tends to suggest that they did not face significant competition from
other dressmakers. None of the dressmakers could think of any other dressmakers who were
in direct competition to them, although some were aware of other dressmakers in their area.

There were other dressmakers but they weren’t really competition (MH, personal interview, February
2000).
I think there is but I honestly don’t know. I think if you’ve got good clients and they pass the word on,
you’ll get the clients back, if your work is good enough (AM, personal interview, March 2000).
There was another dressmaker in Levin. She was very much more of a fashion person. She made clothes
for the important people in the town, such as the mayor’s wife and the bank manager’s family … but she
charged a lot more than we did. We just sewed for the ordinary person (JM, personal interview, June
2000).
No. Instead I tended to send any overflow orders to a friend whose Dutch trained standard passed my
expectations (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).
Oh yes, I had one next door to me at one stage, and she used to come up with a beautiful effect - it looked
lovely - but it didn’t bear looking at on the inside (IG, personal interview, March 2002).

The dressmakers obviously wasted very little time in concerning themselves with the threat of
competition from other practitioners and, while their areas may have had good retail
opportunities, there was no shortage of clients who preferred to have garments made for them.
Several dressmakers commented on retail sources in their areas, and a selection of their
responses is recorded in 5.2.1.1. Everywhere, from the small towns to the larger cities, had a
number of fashion stores and drapery stores. Shoppers in the larger cities could also choose
from well-established department stores. Auckland had several department stores during the
period of the study; for example, Milne and Choyce Limited, Smith and Caughey Limited,
Farmers’ Trading Company, George Courts Limited, and John Courts Limited. Wellington
supported Kirkcaldie and Stains Limited, James Smith Limited, DIC Limited, and the
Farmers’ Trading Company. While the dressmakers acknowledged the variety of choices that the retail stores offered, they did not regard them as any threat to their role as producers of made-to-measure garments. The dressmakers’ lack of recall about mail order catalogues that might have competed with them, as an avenue for obtaining clothing, tends to suggest that this source also presented no competition.

7.3.2 Contribution to Fashion and Design

An observation has already been made, in Chapter Five (5.3.4 and 5.3.5), that the dressmakers were not particularly involved in the generation of new and innovative ideas. They did not see themselves as creators of new fashion, and would not have called themselves “designers”. Their interests lay primarily in the craftsmanship, the quality of the work and the satisfaction of their clients.

When asked if their clients were fashion conscious, six of the dressmakers answered “yes” and eight answered, “yes, to a limited extent”. However, the clients’ adherence to fashion was a reflection of existing fashion rather than a generation of new ideas on their part, given that they generally took a picture from a magazine or a pattern to the dressmaker.

Yes, I would think (that they were fashion conscious. That’s probably why a lot of them had their clothes made, because they could always have something different from what was in the shops. They’d see something in a magazine, especially the teenagers going off to America (on American Field Service exchange). They’d bring Seventeen magazine around, which was a great teenage magazine in those days … I know two of the girls that went (to America), I suppose I must have made them about twenty articles of clothing each (MH, personal interview, February 2000).

Oh yes, definitely (fashion conscious). Lady Bruce Chapman; they lived at Le Bons Bay or somewhere over there, and they had their own aeroplane and they used to fly over for fittings (DB, personal interview, May 2003).

Yes, some were (fashion conscious). Some went to races – that’s what I was after, the race crowd people, for the hats and the clothes. Once you got the work, word spread … They just wanted something individual, something they thought up … Quite a lot said they didn’t want to look like everyone up the road, bought from the shop (PF, personal interview, April 2003).

I’ve got one girl who is very fashion conscious. With her, we sit down and we natter about what it is that she wants. So, we do anything. We’ve got lace and bits and pieces here, and maybe it (has) a seam across the bodice and we leave it partly open, because that’s something that’s in fashion … And I think it’s terrific, I enjoy doing that. I think, didn’t it turn out well (AM, personal interview, March 2000).
Yes, they were very (fashion conscious) on reflection. It was very different world of dress in those days; hats, gloves and high heels, and slacks were never worn socially. Race days were a real fashion show (MP, personal interview, July 2000).

Nearly half of the dressmakers had been asked to make a copy of a designer original at some stage in their careers. ZP admitted:

Many times my husband could be seen with his camera, using his skills to produce a good shot and thus avoiding flash back from off the shop window. This was done early in the morning, or I have been seen sketching the design at night, even to be caught by the boutique owner herself as she left the premises (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).

None of the interviewed dressmakers had a portfolio or a range of their designs that they offered to clients. None of the dressmakers expressed any suggestion of ever wanting to do so. They overwhelmingly gave the impression that their design contribution was no greater than ensuring that the design suited the client, and suggesting minor changes. On reflection, perhaps the dressmakers should have been asked the question, did they see themselves as fashionable; as followers of fashion? Did they make their own clothes? Did they like to wear something different and unique themselves? MH, ML and MP all indicated that they enjoyed making their own clothes and, therefore, being able to wear something unique.

(I made) all my clothes. I think I’ve only ever had one bought dress in my life … We used to go to town every Friday, two aunties and I, and we’d be all dressed up with our hats and gloves on … A couple of times, the manager of Cash Doors (a local department store) told us how smart we looked and what a pleasure it was to see us coming into the shop (MH, personal interview, February 2000).

This is the reason that I sewed for myself. I didn’t ever want to walk into a room and find someone wearing the same thing as me, and I think a lot of my clients (felt) the same (ML, personal interview, September 2000).

I’ve always liked clothes that were a wee bit different to the run of the mill. When I think back now I actually over the years had some really nice (garments) (MP, personal interview, July 2000).

I know (that) I used to go to films and see, say, a blouse and I’d think, oh that’s nice, and I’d go home and make it (for myself) (IG, personal interview, March 2002).

When asked what type of garments they predominantly made, the responses indicated that the range was very wide. Sixteen of the eighteen dressmakers said that they made wedding gowns, for brides and bridesmaids. Ballgowns were also commonly ordered; made for
debutante balls by the older dressmakers, and for school balls by the younger practitioners, reflecting the change in the popularity of these events. Several dressmakers were known for their expertise in tailored suits and coats. Images Thirty-Seven to Forty-Four (pp. 228 – 235) include wedding gowns, bridesmaids’ dresses and a ballgown, made by New Zealand dressmakers from 1948 to 1968.

Clothes were also ordered for other special purposes, such as race meetings, cocktail parties, vestments for the church, and performance clothing. DL (personal interview, June 2000), mentioned making kilts, Highland dancing outfits and national dancing costumes. She also said, “I didn’t really try to specialise, but by the way my business grew to one hundred and fifty clients at the time, I must have been well known”. AM recalls making performance clothing for one of New Zealand’s well-known entertainers of the 1970s:

I made for one of The Chicks - Suzanne. They were singing in some rock and roll thing. This was quite a few years ago … they were performance clothes … I even did a man’s suit once. Well, he was a rock and roll chappy who wanted a rock and roll outfit, so I made that for him, with his long coat and trousers and fur around his cuffs (AM, personal interview, March 2000).

MH’s description of the range of garments that she made is representative of a number of the dressmakers. She said that she made:

Anything; from shorts, blouses, skirts, dresses, winter suits, coats, frocks, wedding outfits, wedding dresses, bridesmaids’ outfits. Some years there could be one (wedding) a month. I suppose, say, if you averaged eight to ten a year … ten to twelve a year … if you take twenty years, average it at eight a year, that’s one hundred and sixty weddings. There would be anything up to eight balls a year. There’d be the Catholic Ball, the Hunt Club Ball; there were the different balls where the debs came out … I’d nearly always have a deb for each of these; some of them, I’d have three or four. The debs were mostly (from) the farming community. A lot of (my clients) used to talk about the weddings. The gowns would have beadwork, and roses, pieced lace, appliqués, fabric roses and leaves and stems, and trims (MH, personal interview, February 2000).

The dressmakers felt that they developed and maintained their client base through offering a good fit and good quality workmanship at a fair price. The general perception was that a number of clients wanted something different to the garments available in the shops. Individuality and a personalised fit seemed to be very important to the clients, even if the
individualisation extended only to using a personally selected fabric and slightly changing the
details on a pattern or picture from a magazine. DL (personal interview, June 2000) said that the clients:

got the style, colour and fitting they wanted. I suppose in one way, I specialise in the larger figure. I even had two women with hunchbacks, and they were a real challenge as the back had to be cut out separately, allowing for the hump on one side.

Several dressmakers mentioned that elderly clients could not get clothes that fitted them well.

Most of (the older clients) have said, (the clothes) are all for younger people. The elderly haven’t got much choice. They like their own fabric and a style that suits them. Older people seem to have maybe a hunchback, or (are) shortwaisted, or want a longer skirt (AM, personal interview, March 2000).

Larger figured women were also catered for by the dressmakers, because they apparently found it difficult to buy “smarter styles” (MP, personal interview, July 2000).

The dressmakers’ responses to the question, “Why, in your opinion, did your clients come to you?”, indicated that the dressmakers were very proud of their work. Typical responses were:

They thought I was good at my job. They liked what they had seen (MH, personal interview, February 2000);

Good workmanship. I’ve had quite a lot of people, when they come back, say they have had people stop them and ask, where did you get that from? You couldn’t have got it in New Zealand and isn’t it great? (AM, personal interview, March 2000).

(Customers) came back time after time. That showed that they were satisfied (JM, personal interview, June 2000).

Because in the 50s, not many people knew how to draft, cut and assemble clothes from verbal descriptions, photos or illustrations. I was able to do this with no “mess ups”. I was an economical alternative for clients (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).

The customers probably came to me to get something different to what the stores had “on the peg”, and I would try to do something strictly for them (MP, personal interview, July 2000).

Because I made good shoulders! Nearly everyone who came to have a jacket or suit (made) said, I love your shoulders. I must have done a good job. I had a good training, you see (ED, personal interview, June 2001).

I know I had one customer (who) was a very big girl, and she reckoned that I was the only person who could make a dress to fit her (IG, personal interview, March 2002).

The dressmakers were also involved in the making of items other than clothing. AM made homewares for a client's bedroom, including sheets, pillowcases, a duvet cover and curtains. MF sewed piano covers for a school and ceremonial items used for dressing the church. PF was very involved in the making of millinery. AM was prepared to make accessories to
match garments, such as belts, handbags, and hair accessories. IG recalled making outfits for
dolls that graced the bonnets of the bridal cars, a common adornment in the 1950s and 1960s.

I nearly invariably got the job of dressing the dolls for the cars. I loved that. As near to the bride’s
frock as I could get it (IG, personal interview, March 2002).

Four or five of the dressmakers offered more of a consultation service to their clients,
particularly to brides. They would go shopping with the client, to assist with the selection of
fabric and the quantity required, and to advise on the matching of accessories. They also went
to the client’s home to help with dressing the bridal party on the wedding day.

Throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s, there were a number of competitions that dressmakers
could enter. Local areas frequently featured dressmaking competitions at Agricultural and
Pastoral shows, “Bride of the Year” events, church women’s group fundraisers, and under
sponsorship from fabric and sewing machine retailers. The most well-known national
competitions were the New Zealand Gown of the Year award (1958 to 1964) and the Benson
and Hedges Fashion Design Awards (1965 to 1995)\(^1\) (Style, Summer 2001, p.120). Less well
known were the New Zealand Wool Board Awards, sponsored by the New Zealand Wool
Board. The Board was established in 1944 “to oversee the preparation, distribution and
internal marketing of New Zealand’s longest sustained export commodity” (Wolfe, 1999,
p.103). Many of the entrants in the New Zealand Gown of the Year Competition were
described as dressmakers or designers or both (Regnault, 2002). Winners of the New Zealand
Wool Board Awards and the Benson and Hedges Fashion Design Awards were generally
referred to as designers.

The interviewed dressmakers generally did not enter dressmaking or design competitions.
Eleven of the women said that they had never done so, for the reasons that they were too busy
or, more frequently, that they lacked confidence. Two of the women entered the Benson and Hedges Fashion Design Awards, the most prestigious fashion event in New Zealand for many years.

We put an outfit into that, a dress and a coat. Didn’t come anywhere, but that wasn’t the point. We entered, we had a go. Then, I wore the dress and the coat afterwards (AM, personal interview, March 2000).

The other awards entered were generally local dressmaking competitions. Two of the dressmakers won prizes for garments they had entered in church competitions and one achieved an award in a “Bride of the Year” event. Although competitions were well publicised and open to anyone, the dressmakers tended not to enter, even though they had the technical expertise to do so. This reinforces the perception that they did not see themselves as designers or creators, although the lack of time available to them to devote to making competition garments was clearly a factor. Also they did not see the need to use such opportunities to promote their businesses because they already had a strong client base.

JA had strong opinions on her right to be taken seriously as a professional dressmaker. The actions that she took to achieve this demonstrate considerable pride in her profession.

The only thing that ever worried me in this field was the social implications of being “just a sewer”, and it’s not nice. I think it’s a highly skilled job for those who get there. Because the sewer was (considered to be) at the bottom of the social strata, that used to really irritate me, and I thought, now how am I going to get out of this? So, when I started to sew for a living, I thought, there’s only one way round this, re-invent yourself. People who have expertise in some field have “-ologist” on the end of their name. I became a “sewologist”. I thought, I don’t need to put myself down and say, I’m just a dressmaker. So, my cards are all printed with sewologist on them - a specialist in that field (JA, personal interview, October 2000).

Undoubtedly JA viewed dressmaking as a viable career, as did the other dressmakers. Their long-term involvement in their professions, and the comprehensive training that many of them received when they were starting out, point to the likelihood that they saw their occupation as a worthwhile career. Certainly, during the period of the study, dressmaking was considered to be a suitable career for women. It seems an anachronism when viewed from a twenty-first century perspective. A fashion student of today would be very unlikely to say that she or he
intended to become a dressmaker. The student’s career of choice is more likely to be that of a designer.

The total output or production of work by the dressmakers was probably not extensive in a commercial sense. All the garments that they produced were made-to-measure, individually cut, and frequently featured hand finishing. However, given the hours and years worked by these women, they would have collectively produced a significant number of garments. Their contribution to the New Zealand apparel industry cannot be measured in quantifiable terms because their production comparative to wholesale manufacturing would be negligible. They did not add to the growth of the fashion industry directly, but their contribution in ensuring that their clients could have the garments that they wanted was significant. Due to their skills, expertise and, possibly, their reasonable prices, they enabled many women to dress fashionably or, at the very least, with individuality.

7.3.3 Contribution to Teaching

The dressmakers could have made a contribution to the furtherance of the New Zealand fashion industry by passing their skills and knowledge on to others. Several were involved in teaching. One taught sewing to school children, and another taught millinery at night classes at three different colleges for ten years. Four were involved in the teaching of dressmaking at night classes, but these were invariably hobby classes for women who wanted to learn more about sewing for themselves and their families. One respondent, ZP, had extensive involvement in teaching.

Yes, always, as this was my training. I taught pattern drafting twenty-three years and dressmaking for the same number of years...I am still involved in teaching. I have a night class in pattern drafting at Hagley Community College, and deem this a great privilege. Although it is not dressmaking, I include construction talk, discussion and demonstration in these classes as it is practically impossible not to. I have had a continuous part time career teaching dressmaking and then pattern drafting since late 1952. This has always been to young to mature adults at Risingholme Community Centre, Christchurch Technical College, Christchurch Technical Institute, and Christchurch Polytechnic. I also established the
pattern drafting in the courses run for training the unemployed youth in Christchurch and did this for thirteen years (ZP, personal interview, July 2000).

ML experienced teaching sewing to both adults and school children:

With no training other than having completed a Trade Certificate, I had never dreamt of teaching, but one day the Vice Principal (of the local college) was on my doorstep asking me if I’d go up and do some relief teaching … I taught night school. I taught clothing at Long Bay College when we first came (to Auckland in 1974). They had nobody in the dressmaking part of the school, so here I was, an untrained teacher but with a Trade Certificate, running the Clothing Department … That went on for about eighteen months and (the Prime Minister of the time) was cutting back all the non-academic night school classes and brought it back to two terms, which was a bit shattering … I was going to go to (Teachers’) Training College and complete a teaching qualification, so I could continue, because I just loved teaching (but) in the summer I found myself pregnant (ML, personal interview, September, 2000).

DB taught dressmaking night classes at Christchurch Technical College from 1954 to 1956. During her husband’s tenure as Registrar of the College, he telephoned her at home one day to ask her if she could take the dressmaking class that night. The dressmaking teacher had died in her sleep overnight and a replacement was urgently needed. DB said of her first night of teaching, “It was three weeks before the end of the second term and I went in there, and there were twenty-seven girls in this room – huge. So, I did what I could …” She found that she enjoyed the experience and, when her husband told her that they were going to advertise for someone, she said that she would apply. His response was that they would not have to advertise in that case – the job was hers (DB, personal interview, May 2003).

7.4 EVALUATION OF THE CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEWS

The expectation, when embarking on this investigation, was that interviews with dressmakers would not constitute the sole primary source of information required to answer the research questions posed in Chapter One (1.3). A search of the literature was expected to uncover material that would substantially support and add to the content of the interviews. In reality, the existing documentation was very lean in regard to the practice of dressmaking in New Zealand, apart from relevant material in magazines and popular journals, and official records. Therefore the content of the interviews assumed greater importance as a source of primary material and, for this reason, has been recorded in the interviewees’ own words.
Responses to the interview questions yielded considerable information about the personal backgrounds of the dressmakers. It was possible to develop an understanding of their motivations for pursuing this occupation, and several expanded on this theme with detailed accounts about how they started their careers. These responses were frequently linked to the responses referring to how they had developed their expertise. Although the records of these experiences do not directly assist in determining the significance of private dressmaking to the development of the fashion industry, they have proved to be one of the most interesting outcomes of the interviews. The dressmakers’ reminiscences of how they coped with adversity in their lives and work add to the richness of the knowledge and provide an insight into the period.

The acquisition of equipment and facilities, the sourcing of textiles and haberdashery, and the methods used to attract clients were clearly recalled. The practices of most of the dressmakers were very similar. Although this was a small sample, this similarity gives more weight to the information obtained. During the period of the study, private dressmaking, in the majority of cases, was a practice that usually took place in the home and was organised around running the home and caring for the family. The dressmaker supplied the equipment, labour and expertise, and the client supplied the materials.

Responses to questions that sought information about the type of garments made and the decision making process in regard to designs, were not as revealing as had been expected. Perhaps the dressmakers should have been asked to estimate how many garments of different types that they had made. However, it is very unlikely that any useful figures would have been forthcoming as no records were kept. A review of the client groups that the dressmakers
sewed for, gives some indication of why the clients chose to go to a dressmaker. The clients were frequently described as “just ordinary people”. Commissions such as wedding and ball gowns, garments for boarding school students, school uniforms, and outfits for elderly women, suggest that the requirements met by these garments might not have been easily satisfied by buying ready-made. The ability to cater for difficult figure types also indicates a market that the dressmakers might have covered almost exclusively. Their production has significance in meeting the needs of these markets but perhaps not so much in their contribution to the development of fashion and the mass market.

There was very little certainty amongst the dressmakers about whether their clients were “fashion” conscious. The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Brown, 1993, p.920) defines “fashion-conscious” as “aware of and concerned about fashion”. This context was conveyed to the dressmakers when questioning the degree to which their clients were fashion-conscious. In general, the dressmakers thought that clients just wanted to wear something individualised and that suited them. There was little recall about high fashion that had been produced or about the evident influence of any well known designers of the period. There was some comment that race meetings required outfits that were very “fashionable” and certain to be noticed. On analysis, it is difficult to determine what further questions could have been asked to draw out evidence to indicate the significance of the dressmakers’ contribution to the fashion industry as a whole. Statistically, in the post-war period, the numbers of women who identified in census records as “women in dressmaking, sewing”, was relatively small, although it is extremely likely that, as in earlier period’s of New Zealand’s history, many women working in this capacity did not want their occupation officially recorded if they were not paying tax.
Finally, questions relating to the dressmakers’ involvement in allied activities, that might have assisted to promote dressmaking and fashion, clearly indicated that few of them were interested in entering fashion award competitions. Six of the dressmakers were formally involved in passing on their skills through teaching in evening or hobby class situations. Many of them had taught their daughters how to sew and one succeeded in developing basic mending and making skills in her two grandsons, suggesting that family traditions in dressmaking were being retained. Towards the conclusion of the research, the dressmakers were contacted by telephone to ask if any of their children had become dressmakers or pursued careers in fashion-related fields. Their responses revealed that three dressmakers’ daughters studied fashion qualifications at New Zealand polytechnics, and another daughter started a dressmaking business at home, later moving into business premises. One daughter was an outworker for a clothing company and another worked as a dressmaker from her home when her children were young. Two more dressmakers said that they each had a daughter who was accomplished at sewing, and yet another reported that her nieces sewed. The responses indicate that fifty per cent of the dressmakers have daughters, or nieces, who were or are involved professionally or domestically in the production of clothing. As an example, the researcher is the daughter of a dressmaker, who was taught to sew primarily by her mother and who was already a reasonably accomplished sewer before enrolling in a fashion qualification at a polytechnic. Not all of the dressmakers could be contacted, so it is possible that an even greater proportion of the group may have had children who followed in their career footsteps.

With reference to the original questions, the results obtained from the interviews that responded to those questions were very consistent across the group of dressmakers. Apart from individual experiences in family background and the acquisition of skills and
knowledge, it is unlikely that the results would have been significantly different if a greater number of dressmakers had been surveyed. The responses reveal that the practices and experiences that were the main indicators to the significance of the contribution made, were very similar amongst the majority of the group interviewed. If the experiences of the interviewed dressmakers are accepted as indicative of the practice of dressmaking generally during the period, the garment production resulting from dressmaking is of considerable significance. An established and identifiable market existed for dressmaker garments, meeting in particular but not exclusively, the needs of bridal parties, ball and dance attendees, elderly women, and those with difficult figure types. Clients who wanted garments that were unique and different also patronised dressmakers, seeking a personal signature in their garments in regard to variation in design, personalised fit, and selection of fabrics of their choice. A mutually beneficial relationship existed between the dressmaker’s desire to create in three dimensions and the client’s desire to be individually and stylishly attired.

Sixteen of the interviewed dressmakers came from family backgrounds that encouraged the acquisition of sewing skills and, indeed, such skills were common to many women during this period. Factors such as the inclusion of sewing classes in the school curriculum, dressmaking courses offered to the community, and publication of tips and hints for dressmakers, fostered the development of sewing skills. The dressmakers, in several cases, subsequently influenced an interest in the craft within their own families. A similar parental or family influence is present in the shaping of the careers of a number of contemporary New Zealand fashion designers, as will be further revealed in the following chapter.

Dressmaking continued to be a popular method of clothing production, alongside couture and mass-market manufacturing and, later, boutique production, in post-war New Zealand. The
practice and production of the dressmakers existed beside an ongoing New Zealand manufacturing industry. The diversity of apparel production, and its relationship to fashion design, will be studied in greater depth in Chapter Eight.

NOTES

i The Benson and Hedges Fashion Design Awards became the Smokefree Fashion Awards from 1996 to 1998 inclusive, following the abolition of tobacco company sponsorship for sporting and cultural events. At the end of the agreed three year of government sponsorship of the Smokefree Fashion Awards, no new sponsor could be found and staging of the event ceased.

ii According to the census figures, the number of women who identified as “women in dressmaking, sewing” was three thousand, five hundred and eighty-six in 1945; two thousand, eight hundred and eight in 1956; one thousand, two hundred and twenty-one in 1966; and one thousand, six hundred and twelve in 1976 (Census of Population, Department of Statistics, Wellington), showing a gradual decline in numbers until the 1970s.
Image Thirty-Five: The measurement book of dressmaker MH, with an example of the basic sketch that she had developed for a client, on the left hand page.
Image Thirty-Six: Examples of leaflets and promotional material available to dressmakers to assist them to achieve a professional result.
Image Thirty-Seven: Dressmaker garments from a ball and a wedding; 1950s.
Image Thirty-Eight: 1948 off-white organza crepe wedding gown, made by the bride’s niece.
The bride and her dressmaker bridesmaid; 1950. The bride wears white satin and the bridesmaid is in white lace and tulle, with a white hat with red roses.
Image Forty: A 1950 wedding group featuring gowns made by one of the bridesmaids, a professional dressmaker. The bride’s gown is made of white embossed satin. The bridesmaids are in pale lime brocade.
Image Forty-One: A 1960s dressmaker-made white satin wedding gown with white guipure lace flowers.
Image Forty-Two: A white lace-trimmed satin wedding gown from 1968.
Image Forty-Three: Gowns made by the young flowergirl’s dressmaker mother, for a 1960 wedding. Both dresses are made of flocked nylon; white for the bride and mauve for the flowergirl.
Image Forty-Four: A pale green organza and lace bridesmaid’s dress for a 1951 wedding.
CHAPTER EIGHT

POST-WAR FASHION IN NEW ZEALAND

There were times when we dressed like our mothers, but they were usually occasions of extreme formality. (Race meetings, weddings, debutante dances.) Any event that demanded gloves meant you and Mum turned up as a gruesome double act … Historians reckoned the 50s saw the arrival of men in cardigans, but to those who were there, it was more about girls in skirts … Not that we wanted to look girlish. We had our fashion icons … Dior gave us the Sack Dress. Coco Chanel was our spiritual leader, and her little black dresses and big shiny pearls our uniform … Were we restricted? Not when you realise the key word in dressmaking circles for nearly the entire decade was “semi-fitted”. And there is our generational tag. We were the loose ones (Fraser, 2001, p.15).

This chapter examines the period between the end of World War Two and the political reforms of the 1980s. The 1980s marked the end of the practice of dressmaking as the contributors to this study had experienced it, and indeed the end of patterns of clothing production and consumption that had existed in New Zealand for most of the twentieth century. As such, the 1980s represents a logical defining era in which to end the focus of this study.

While the interviewed dressmakers were making their contribution to the manufacture of post-war fashion, a burgeoning number of New Zealand individuals and organisations were actively involved in creating and promoting a growing “fashion” industry. The 1950s, 60s and 70s afforded a variety of fashion choices for New Zealand women, including imported designer clothing, and European designer garments made under licence in New Zealand. Women could also select from fashion produced by local couture designers, off-the-peg garments designed and made by local fashion companies, and utilitarian middle-of-the-road apparel made by large and small scale clothing manufacturers. Seekers of the more unusual could purchase the product of small fashion boutiques, or made-to-measure garments commissioned from dressmakers, or the outfits that they might have made themselves from the wide selection of paper patterns and fabrics on offer. Of course, this diversity of choice was not unique to New Zealand; similar opportunities existed elsewhere in the world,
particularly in Australia, Great Britain, and the United States of America. The range of contributors who were influencing and producing New Zealand fashion, from the post-war period to the late 1980s, with a brief reference to later decades, will be examined as part of this chapter.

8.1 CONTRIBUTORS TO POST-WAR NEW ZEALAND FASHION

The 1956 census recorded that six thousand, eight hundred and eighty-one women were employed in the manufacture of clothing, the fourth largest employment group for women (Population Census, 1956, p.8). According to Wolfe (2001, p.105), New Zealand school leavers wanting to work in the clothing trade in the 1950s “could choose from dress-making, tailoring, millinery, working in textile mills, technical research, retailing, fashion drawing, pattern cutting and modelling.”

By 1950, any remnants of wartime rationing and restrictions had completely disappeared. Post-war prosperity allowed people the means and incentive to consume, and “new aspirations for work, leisure and material prosperity were reflected in dress” (McKergow in Dalley and Labrum, 2000, p.178).

Fashionable items of dress produced by New Zealand clothing manufacturers were now shown at an annual Fashion Fiesta held in Wellington. The wearing of special items of dress for different activities became increasingly apparent for leisure activities, and special occasions and ceremonies, with greater distinctions emerging between casual and formal wear. These changes are particularly evident from fashion shows, but also in the playing out of various rites of passage. After years of shortages, weddings in the 1950s were characterised by the lavish use of fabric in bridal dresses, especially in full skirts and large trains. Once again sumptuous gowns were made for the wedding day alone (McKergow in Dalley and Labrum, 2000, pp.178-179).

Post-war fashion took its influences from overseas fashion houses, particularly from France, as it had done before the war. New Zealand women were slow to adopt the lower hemlines and nipped in waists that signified late 40s and early 50s fashion, but their conversion was gradually achieved, particularly when local designers made it possible for women to achieve the nipped in waist effect through cut rather than restrictive foundation garments. McKergow
(in Dalley and Labrum, 2000, p.177) notes that, “this new fashion was also offered to New Zealand women through the sale of paper dressmaking patterns, so that they could sew their own versions of this new aesthetic”.

Quéréé and Wood (2003, p.59) report, in confirmation, that Robert Leek, a Dutch-trained fashion designer and illustrator, who arrived in Auckland at the end of 1957, later wrote:

> Despite a certain amount of antipodean colonial cringe, particularly in the ready-to-wear sector, women’s fashions were in no way behind the times, and there were … some extraordinary talents at work; people like Barry McDonnell, Emma Knuckey and Barbara Pemberthey (under the label of “Babs Radon”) and Michael Mattar … Rosemary Muller and Colin Cole (then a new arrival on the scene). And most talented of all, Bruce Papas … (W)hat impressed me most about these people, who could have vied with the best in New York, London and Amsterdam, if not quite perhaps Paris and Rome - was their continuing preferences (within the strictures of the import licensing regime then in force) for natural fibres: woollens, linens, pure silks, and high quality cottons.

New Zealanders were introduced to nylon fabrics and garments in 1949, with local interest aroused by a nation-wide tour of a consignment of nylon dresses, organised by Makower, McBeath and Company of London. Other synthetic fibres, such as acrylic, introduced in 1950, polyester (1953), triacetate (1954), elastane/spandex (1958), and polypropylene/polyolefin (1961), were made into fabrics on their own or blended with natural fibres. These alternatives added to the range of textiles available to designers and manufacturers (Quéréé & Wood, 2003, p.58).

The fashion tastes of New Zealand women were heavily influenced by the coronation tour visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953/54. Leading British designers ensured that the young queen was a role model for fashionable dress and her appearance was noted in many publications. According to Quéréé and Wood (2003, p.60):

> Such was the popularity of the pretty young monarch that British designs and designers threatened to usurp the reigning French kings and queens of fashion. Readily available paper patterns by designers like Norman Hartnell, the Queen’s couturier, became one of the mainstays of the New Zealand home dressmaking front.

Alison Masters (quoted in Phillips, ‘Royal Visit of 1953-54’, n.d.) recalls joining the crowds on an Auckland street to view the arrival:
The Queen did indeed look disarmingy youthful, but quite lovely. Her dress was citrus lemon, bright, clear with tucks at the sleeve and around the skirt. She waved, smiled and after the handshakes climbed into a bubble-topped limousine. “An orchid beneath cellophane” enthused the Auckland Star that evening…And the dress? Dressmaking pattern companies lost little time issuing a pattern for that special dress. My mother sewed one for me, not lemon, but floral, and I felt great to be wearing it.

The 1950s decade was the era of “name” designers, such as Dior, Balenciaga, Balmain, Givenchy, Fath, and Chanel. Their designs were frequently copied or, at least, considerably influenced manufacturers in many countries, including New Zealand. A fashion timeline in the New Zealand Herald described the 1950s as, “the years of DIY and Dior. New Zealand fashion followed two distinct strands: home-made and serviceable and home-made and international” (Weekend Herald, “Canvas” Section, 16-17 October 2004, p.12). Local women could dress in the height of fashion in legitimate “model” garments that were designed in England or France and made under licence in New Zealand. Auckland manufacturer Gus Fisher secured the New Zealand licence to reproduce Dior garments from original patterns sent from Paris (Quéréé & Wood, 2003, p.58). Woman’s Choice informed its readers, in an article entitled “Behind The Fashion Scene”, that:

The (Dior) collection has its own workroom and its own staff of highly skilled seamstresses. Each garment is individually cut and made. Some elaborate gowns take as long as three weeks to complete. The patterns come out from Paris with detailed and thorough cutting and making instructions (Woman’s Choice, September 1958, p.20).

Fisher also manufactured his own label “El Jay”. Woman’s Choice reported on his design process:

Nearly every year Mr Fisher goes to New York, London and Paris to see for himself the latest lines, styles and fabrics; these he interprets to suit the New Zealand taste and way of life. However, when he has a year at home he has to study all the overseas forecasts, the latest fashion magazines and the screeds of information sent to him by informed sources. There are agencies, especially in the United States, whose sole job is to compile information on trends, best sellers, colour and so on that are of interest to the manufacturers and retailers of the world.

Once the fabric is matched to the design - and this is never done overnight as a great deal of the success of a range depends on the fabric design tie-up - the drawings are delivered to the cutters who work closely with the designer (in this case Mr Fisher himself). It is here the garment is tested and tried. Toiles - calico patterns - are made and any defect in the design is noted and corrected at this stage. Finally the perfect toile is “okayed” for production and the cutters and machinists make up a sample for the selling range (Woman’s Choice, September 1958, p.20).
Quérée and Wood (2003, p.59) confirm that many women made their own everyday dresses “from readily available patterns by Buttericks (sic), McCalls, and Simplicity, as well as those helpfully provided by the New Zealand Woman’s Weekly and Academy Fashion News (which began in the early 1940s)”. See Images Forty-Five and Forty-Six (pp.272 – 273) for examples of dress patterns, plus the New Zealand Woman’s Weekly continued to offer advice on fashion (Image Forty-Seven, p.274).

The 1966 census records that nearly twenty thousand women were employed as “tailors, cutters, furriers and related workers”; nearly nine thousand as “clothing machinists”; over six thousand in the “manufacture of clothing” (figures not included elsewhere); and one thousand, two hundred and twenty-one in “dressmaking, sewing” (1966 New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings, p.3, 10). There were several large-scale clothing manufacturers operating around the country, producing a variety of product. For example, Holeproof Industries Limited, manufacturer of sportswear, shirts and blouses, knitwear, menswear, and hosiery, employed over one thousand people in 1960. Lane, Walker, Rudkin Limited, manufacturers of sportswear, underwear, hosiery, and casual clothing, employed a staff of three thousand, eight hundred and twenty-one by the early 1970s (Wolfe, 2001, pp.79-81).

Fashion was big business, although the early part of the 1960s decade was still dominated by the elegant and conventional looks of mainstream fashion. The majority of designers were employed in clothing companies, then the mainstay of the New Zealand fashion industry. Very few designers had their own labels, and this lack of recognition for designers in their own right, led the then president of the New Zealand Modelling Association, Jeannie Gandar, to organise a small fashion awards show. This show, held in Wellington in 1964, featured only fourteen designers but, by the following year, it had become the Benson and Hedges

Small-scale clothing manufacturing companies also proliferated, along with the large-scale producers. Official sources record a total of seven hundred and thirteen clothing factories in existence in the 1965-66 year, and a total of six hundred and seventy-five in the 1967-68 year (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1970, p.517). Most companies did not maintain retail outlets, preferring to employ representatives to sell to established retailers. Geary (2001, p.119) reports that:

Before the advent of the speciality fashion boutique in the 1960s, the department store was God when it came to fashion. There were no proper local fashion magazines then, and imported fashion magazines were scarce, so there was no other direction. To find out what was in for a season, you studied department store window displays and attended in-store parades. Department store buyers wielded enormous power.

Quéréé and Wood (2003, p.63) assert that the increasing importance of the young consumer; the impact of the buying power of a younger generation who rebelled against the conservatism of their elders; brought about a revolution in the nature of clothing production and retailing in New Zealand.

Small shops began to be run by owners and staff who were as youthful as their customers, and the demand for virtually “throw-away” fashions became such that manufacturers were forced into frequently changing, short production runs. This trend was ideally suited to New Zealand’s larger clothing manufacturers, who, because of our small population base, already had the necessary flexibility to cope with short-term, changing demands. It is probable that the rate at which styles changed or developed encouraged the nascent New Zealand fashion design industry as well as the growth of boutique retailing.

The late 1960s and 1970s saw the establishment of a number of fashion “boutiques”. This type of fashion enterprise had its origins in London in the late 1950s and early 1960s and, inevitably, the idea was adopted in New Zealand. Fogg (2003, p.7) contends that in Britain the word “boutique” was used “to describe any small independent retailer that neither offered made-to-measure couture fashion nor the wholesale manufactured clothes sold in department stores”. Essentially they offered fashion garments and accessories designed by the young for
the young, to meet the demands of a generation who no longer saw themselves as merely a more youthful version of their parents. May (1992, p.182) reports that in New Zealand at the end of the 1960s:

The 10 - 24 age group made up one-third of the population …This bulge, which had been created by the postwar baby boom, contributed to the emergence of “the teenager” as a new social category. The distinctiveness of a teenage culture had become evident in the 1950s with the girl “widgie”, the boy “bodgie” and the “teddy boy”, cults whose defiance and strangeness had already become the focus of much analysis and disapproval. By the 1960s, however, a consumer market in clothing and entertainment awaited the spending power of a much larger population of postwar-born teenagers. These subcultures, fed via the media from America and Britain into every home, had their own kind of music, dress and idols (mostly male), and a failure to conform to their dictates brought with it the label of being “square”.

One of New Zealand’s first boutiques opened in Auckland in 1966. It was named Bizarre, possibly in recognition of the success of Mary Quant’s Bazaar boutique, opened in London in late 1955 and considered to be the forerunner of boutique businesses. Other New Zealand boutiques followed, including Nova, Annie Bonza, Countdown, Paraphernalia, and Tigermoth. Many featured the psychedelic interiors and graphics typical of the time.

According to Wolfe (2001, p.60):

By the early 1970s, the concept of the boutique had caught on. In Auckland, a fifth of all the city’s 250 ladieswear shops then called themselves boutiques, with varying degrees of similarity to the original Bazaar. The centre of world fashion was acknowledged with Hung on You, London Affair and Top Gear. French influence was, allegedly, strong with Angelique, Bijou, Jolie, La Boutique and Modelle, but in many cases just a Christian name would do, as in Bianca’s World, Bobby’s, Emma, Gay’s, Judee, Nicola and Georgia.

Stock for these retail establishments was usually produced in small, adjacent workrooms, and absorbed entirely by the stores they served (Wolfe, 2001, p.27). The name of their resident designer, and frequently the owner of the business, was more likely to be known to the public, such as Marilyn Sainty, who established Scotties in the late 1960s. Wolfe (2001, p.61) notes that:

Looking back, New Zealand’s early boutiques were the result of a unique combination of circumstances. They were valiant attempts by young entrepreneurs to satisfy a new generation of fashion-conscious consumers who were otherwise deprived by a lack of imports. Their businesses were largely cooperative, and dependent on the more easy-going nature of the times. Unemployment was unknown, and many of the individuals concerned were art school students who could always go teaching, if all else failed. In the meantime, many enjoyed the previously impossible - deriving some sort of income from their craft.
Christchurch fashion designer Barbara Lee recalls that she opened her first boutique, Grannys Boutique Limited, in 1968, with “perfect timing”. She recognised that:

Before boutiques arrived in town, clothing was usually purchased from department stores. Anything out of the mainstream was imported, and likely to cost six months salary. Women without entrée to the exclusive racks had a dressmaker or made their own clothes. Boutiques changed that. Impulse shopping was essential - if you waited until payday it would probably be gone (The Press, “Features” section, 11 July 2000, p. unknown).

The New Zealand public received its information about the latest designs from magazines, newspapers, and the growing influence of television. The promotions department of the New Zealand Wool Board was also instrumental in presenting the latest styles and trends in overseas fashion from the mid-1960s on. The Wool Board toured an annual show, entitled “Paris Report”, to the four main centres. The show included garments from leading designers in Paris, Milan, London, and North America, and was presented to trade representatives (manufacturers and retailers of woollen yarns, fabrics and clothes) and journalists, with the aim of promoting the use of pure wool (Quérée & Wood, 2003, p.66). A personal memory exists of being given the opportunity to attend the “Paris Report” shows as a young fashion student; sketchbook in hand and over-awed by the glamour and significance of the occasion.

Few of the contributors of stock to the boutiques developed any individual profile as designers or makers of garments. Two exceptions to this are Roland Wimmers, who owned both menswear and womenswear shops and went on to win Benson and Hedges Fashion Design awards, and Annie Bonza, who opened a shop in the mid-60s and won a Benson and Hedges Fashion Design award in 1971 (New Zealand Woman’s Weekly, 12 June 1989, p.26). (See Image Forty-Nine, p.276). Bonza has been previously mentioned in Chapter Two (2.2.4) as one of the designers and/or dressmakers who have been the occasional subjects of newspaper and magazine articles. She, like a number of other practitioners, has been referred
to as a designer and a dressmaker. Chapter Two introduced the question of whether there was a period when the designations of “dressmaker” and “fashion designer” were interchangeable.

The experience of Bruce Papas is an interesting indicator of this possibility. In the late 1940s, Papas was offered an apprenticeship with Ninett Gowns, a glamour fashion business in Auckland. His main responsibility was to develop embroidery designs:

But his family insisted on a formal apprenticeship so Papas spent five years with Mackenzie learning pattern making, embroidery design, beading, appliqué, fabric draping and bespoke tailoring (New Zealand Herald, 15 December 1999, p.G8).

Several reports suggest that, at various stages in his career, he not only designed exclusive gowns but also made them for individual clients. (See Image Fifty, p.277). Flora McKenzie, the owner of Ninett Gowns to whom he was apprenticed, appears to have been responsible, at least prior to Papas’ appointment, for the design of the business’ gowns, but she is described as “a talented dressmaker” (New Zealand Herald, 8 October 1985, p. unknown). McKenzie was also well known for her other business interests, maintaining high-class brothels.

New Zealander Annie Bonza, consistently referred to as a “fashion designer”, began her career with a three year cutter designer’s apprenticeship in the mid 1950s. She progressed to designing for several companies, ownership of her own fashion business, a seven year period of living in Rarotonga and, on her return to New Zealand:

Until she opened her Ponsonby, Auckland, shop last year (1988) with business partner Victoria Palace she worked mainly on private commission. “For three years I basically survived on people telephoning me up when they wanted something made. I didn’t advertise” (New Zealand Woman’s Weekly, 12 June 1989, p.27).

This would seem to place her as both a fashion designer and a dressmaker.

A 1949 issue of the Mirror carries an article entitled “A Wedding Dress Is Born”, describing how the writer went to designer Angele Delanghe’s studio to observe her process.
Angele Delanghe is one of the great dressmakers of our time. She is among the exclusive designers who made dresses for Princess Elizabeth’s wedding. I saw her gather up yards and yards of soft white satin and start draping, tucking, pinning and folding it on to a dressmaker’s dummy (Scott, V., Mirror, No. 12 Vol. XXVIII June 1949, p.27).

Dalmatian born Vinka Lucas, who emigrated to New Zealand in the mid 1950s, is also consistently called a “designer”, although she was also the creator of one-off garments for individual clients from her Maree du Maru bridal gown and “After Five” evening wear businesses. During the 1980s she established a designer business in Saudi Arabia, creating garments for wealthy Saudi women. She is quoted as saying:

I introduce a completely new element - one-off design creativity for this particular market. Fundamentally European designs but with flamboyant embellishment (New Zealand Woman’s Weekly, 25 August, 1980, p. unknown).

This practice perhaps differentiated her from smaller businesses heavily reliant on one designer / dressmaker since she fits more into the mould of a designer couturier and was more strongly business oriented. (See Image Fifty-One, p.278).

During the 1950s, 60s and 70s, there were several fashion couture businesses operating, mostly in Auckland, where the proprietors were referred to as designers. From the 1950s, Emma Knuckey, Vinka Lucas, Bruce Papas, and Trilby Yates produced work under their own labels. Colin Cole, Rosemarie Muller, Annie Bonza, and Michael Mattar set up businesses in the 1960s. Mattar was based in Taumarunui, a small town halfway between Auckland and Wellington on the main railway line. Day trips to his salon were apparently popular among society ladies, particularly for suits and eveningwear. Kevin Berkahn, Sybil Churton, and Marilyn Sainty established their names in the 1970s. An exhibition entitled After Six Before Eight (Auckland War Memorial Museum, 10 October to 9 November 2003) featured cocktail dresses created by several of the above designers. The publicity brochure that accompanied the exhibition referred to it as tracing “the evolution of local couture as designers took their cue from international trends and progressed to create garments reflective of our own unique
style and identity.” Louis Levaillant, the curator of the exhibition, said in an interview, “the exhibition was really to start (people) thinking that we do have a fashion history in Auckland that has been here for a long period of time. We wanted to promote our collections and look back, celebrate and reminisce about those designers who have already made a really stunning contribution to our fashion scene” (Sunday Star-Times, “About Town” section, 19 October 2003, p.9).

Whether these practitioners referred to themselves as designers or not, or whether fashion historians and the media now refer to them as designers retrospectively, there is a significant difference between them and the interviewed dressmakers. Generally speaking, they maintained professional business premises and, while they still might have been personally involved in cutting, fitting and making garments to individual measurements, they were generating their own original designs. They may have been heavily influenced by international fashion but they were presenting original interpretations. New Zealand fashion writer Stacy Gregg would dispute that even this success and involvement in original design generation qualified them to be called designers. She contends that:

Those of you old enough to recall the televised Benson & Hedges fashion shows of the 1960s and 1970s may wish to dispute the lack of fashion in our past. My response would be that back then what we had were some talented dressmakers who looked to the rest of the world for their inspiration. Today we have true fashion designers who are establishing their own unique look and selling that vision to the world instead (Gregg, 2003, p.8).

She also offers her distinction between a dressmaker and a designer; “there is a world of difference between creating a dress and putting together a fashion collection” (Gregg, 2003, p.12). Perhaps this statement reflects the essence of this issue. Certainly, in contemporary terms, a designer would be expected to produce an inter-related collection of garments rather than a series of unrelated “one off” gowns.
8.1.1 The Contribution of Awards and Promotions

The situation was a little different for the entrants in the *New Zealand Gown of the Year* competition. It has been referred to as “a major fixture on the social and fashion calendars … in the early 60s” and “a travelling fashion spectacular that traversed the North Island showing off ball frocks by New Zealand’s top designers and dressmakers” (Lloyd-Jenkins, D., *New Zealand Herald*, 5 September 2001, p.G2). The official rules and conditions of the competition required the entrant to attest “that the gown entered is entirely original, wholly designed, cut and made up in New Zealand.”

In 1958, the first year of the *New Zealand Gown of the Year* awards, the nine finalists included both new and established designers, among them Rosemarie Muller, Emma Knuckey, Michael Mattar and Babs Radon. The winner, Lea Draysey, a bridal and eveningwear specialist, later said that “winning the Gown of the Year proved a springboard of success” (Regnault, 2002, p.9). While each year featured a number of known designers in the list of finalists, self-acknowledged dressmakers were included too. In 1960, Napier dressmaker Jane Lang was the winner. The 1964 winner, Carol Matheson, referred to herself as “just a dressmaker” (Regnault, 2002, p.17). New Plymouth dressmaker Ann Day was placed third in the same year. The successes of these dressmakers indicate that they were as capable of producing individual creative work as the designers who had entered.

The popularity of the *New Zealand Gown of the Year* competition, during its seven annual events from 1958 to 1964, could be reflective of the desire of New Zealand audiences to enjoy “an evening of escapism from their cares and the dreary realities of post-war New Zealand”, as Regnault describes it (2002, p.41). Her assertion that the contest became “the ultimate showcase for designers and dressmakers who specialised in the traditional and
dream-laden world of debutantes, weddings, twenty-firsts and balls” (2002, p.41), recalls the success that the interviewed dressmakers were enjoying during this period as they were involved in the creation of garments for the same occasions. As Regnault (2002, p.45) says:

By the late 1950s, New Zealand women could buy their own Hartnell and Dior designs made under licence. Pattern services and a large workforce of dress makers, based in department stores, salons and home workrooms throughout the country, re-created a sense of grandness on a less than royal budget for an array of formal occasions, from debutante to hunt balls. As memories of the war receded and the country prospered, such celebrations could be enjoyed to the full again. It was in this atmosphere that the New Zealand Gown of the Year blossomed.

Several of the entrants in the New Zealand Gown of the Year awards were able to use their successes in this competition to make the transition from dressmakers to designers. This event acted as a launching pad for their careers as designers and perhaps that was their motivation for entering. Regnault (2002, p.62) notes that Lea Draysey, the first winner, had started her business with one sewing machine in the 1950s. By 1963, after her win and following her son Robert Ryan’s win in the same competition in 1961, Draysey employed sixteen people. Jane Lang, the 1960 winner, moved to Wellington to take advantage of numerous new clients and became a popular designer in diplomatic circles. Other winners and finalists, such as Rosalie Thomson and Michael Mattar, subsequently won awards at the Benson and Hedges Fashion Design Awards. However, the majority of finalists continued their modest careers by designing for clothing manufacturers or continuing to produce gowns for private clients. “Many other female entrants had trained in their youth and given up full-time careers for marriage and motherhood, sewing for family and friends” (Regnault, 2002, p.64). Examples of New Zealand Gown of the Year garments are shown in Images Fifty-Two and Fifty-Three (pp.279 – 280).

The New Zealand Gown of the Year faced competition in the early 1960s from the Golden Shears and the New Zealand Wool Board Awards and, later, the Benson and Hedges Fashion
Design Awards. Where the New Zealand Gown of the Year had been selected by public vote, these new competitions were judged by industry professionals on contemporary styling and design, quality of finish and appropriate use of fabric. Regnault (2002, p.52) contends that, “these new competitions emerged as a result of a burgeoning local fashion industry that each year became more sophisticated.”

Certainly during the 1970s, a distinct fashion centre developed in Auckland, first in Swanston Street, then in Emily Place, where twelve fashion houses and agencies operated. The companies included Peppertree, Love Story Fashions, Maggy, and Figgins Fashions: all manufacturers of fashion womenswear (Wolfe, 2001, p.39). Seventies clothes, according to Quéréé and Wood (2003, p.68), “were a curious mixture of streamlined off-the-peg garments, ethnic look-alikes, “blasts from the past”, and functional styling.” The establishment of design-led manufacturers of women’s fashion clothing had started in the 1960s with Society Fashions (1961), Miss Deb (mid-1960s), and Thornton Hall and Peppertree (1967). Peppertree and Terrific (labels by Peppertree), and Hullabaloo (label by Thornton Hall), were iconic New Zealand labels of the period that did not promote the hippie or ethnic look, so prevalent at the time.

By 1976, twenty thousand, one hundred and sixty-three women were recorded in the category “Tailors, dressmakers, sewers, upholsterers and related workers” (1976 New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings, p.11). This was the seventh largest employment group for women. The clerical group was the largest with three times as many employees. The 1976 census records that close to sixty-five per cent of the apparel group were married women. At the same time, the number of women who identified as “Women in Dressmaking, Sewing” or “Women in Tailoring, Dressmaking”, was in decline, although the numbers were always
comparatively small. The growing acceptance of married women in the workplace during the 1960s and 1970s, would no doubt have contributed to the employment of greater numbers of women in the apparel sector, outside the home.

Resources that provide insight into the directions of post-war New Zealand fashion are not restricted to text alone. Researchers and historians of New Zealand made clothing of the post-war period have been greatly assisted in their study by the acquisition by Canterbury Museum of the Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection of twentieth century New Zealand clothing. The Mackenzie Collection includes approximately two thousand, two hundred examples of formal, everyday, sports and leisure clothing for women, plus some men’s and children’s wear. In addition, there are approximately eight hundred examples of accessories and other fashion related items, such as patterns, pattern books, and fashion magazines. The majority of items range from the 1920s to the mid-1980s, with a significant part of the collection featuring garments from the 1950s and 1960s. Quéréé and Wood (2003, pp.51-52) report that:

Most of the garments are “off-the-rack”, or domestically produced, rather than exclusive models, and thus document what was worn by the average person in New Zealand.

Mackenzie was a fashion writer, artist and advisor whose writing appeared, in her own name and under a variety of pseudonyms, in New Zealand publications over a period of about thirty years, dating from 1937. Her ability to select typical examples of the then current fashions, and to assiduously catalogue and care for them, has ensured that primary evidence exists to confirm the wide range of fashion possibilities available to New Zealand women at the time. Examples from the Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection can be seen in Images Fifty-Four, Fifty-Five and Fifty-Six (pp.281 – 283).
8.2 DETERMINING THE CONTRIBUTION MADE BY DRESSMAKERS TO POST-WAR FASHION

Viewed retrospectively, it is clear that the three decades following the end of World War Two represent the period when apparel manufacturing in New Zealand was in its heyday. Protectionism, in the form of restricted import licences and tariffs on imported clothing, ensured that locally made product did not face significant competition. Tariffs on imported clothing, at a high of sixty-five per cent, effectively doubled the cost of such items and limited their consumption to a small market (Larson, 2001, p.53). The New Zealand apparel industry was described as, “closeted in an environment of government protectionism, (with) only a handful of high-fashion designers catering to a limited, made-to-measure niche market” (Her Business, November/December 2004, p.33). Wolfe (2001, pp.83-84) contends that:

A general shortage of goods in the period following the Second World War stimulated a number of local businesses, with varying degrees of enterprise and originality. Most of this country’s clothing was either made here, or was of solid “British” manufacture, but it wasn’t necessarily cheap - a point well made by Mabel Howard in the House of Representatives in 1954. But for the next two decades, things changed very little. While there were bargains to be had, the country was protected from the possibilities of cheaper imports, with high tariffs and limited quotas. Nevertheless, these were glory days for main street shopping, when most of New Zealand did its shopping on a Friday night.

Because there was work for all, due to a long period of financial prosperity and the lack of any real competition from imported garments, home-based dressmakers were also in demand during this period. During the 1950s, the number of women who declared themselves as dressmakers in census records, represented almost a third of the total number of women employed in clothing production. When the likelihood that approximately half of the practising dressmakers did not officially declare their occupations is factored in, their potential number reaches significant proportions. Of course, during this era, the position of “dressmaker” existed in commercial workrooms, so the declared number would be unlikely to reflect only women who worked from home.
A combination of factors ensured a ready market for new outfits in the post-war years. These include the rise in the number of weddings following World War Two and an interest in fashion and femininity generated as a reaction to the drabness of the war years. (See examples of dressmaker-made garments in Images Fifty-Seven to Sixty-One, pp.284 – 288). The adherence to the concept of the “right” costume for particular occasions, the rise of different modes of dress for the younger and older generations, and the continuation of formal and semi-formal social occasions such as balls and cocktail parties, particularly in the pre-television era, were also contributing factors. A prosperous economy, the increasing number of women in the workforce, and the growth in population numbers as the first of those born in the immediate post-war years, the “baby boomer” generation, reached young adulthood in the 1970s, were of significance too. The interviewed dressmakers’ experiences indicate that dressmakers were heavily involved in providing garments to meet the market requirements listed above.

Most of the clothing available in New Zealand in the 1950s was locally made. For example, in 1949-50 the value of the output of the clothing (not including footwear) factories was just under £14,719,000, and the value of imported “apparel, footwear, and minor articles” was just under £3,167,000, demonstrating that the volume of local product was far in excess of imported product (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1953, p.552; p.280). Judson (1999, p.24) records that most of the clothing available in New Zealand in the 1950s was locally made.

Imported clothing never featured substantially in the 1950s but reduced from a high of 8% of all manufactured clothing value in 1954 to a low of 2% by 1959.
Judson’s study of a sample range of two hundred and seventeen garments dating from the 1950s, drawn from the Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection housed at Canterbury Museum, has shown that dressmakers were responsible for a considerable proportion of garment production during this period.

Although no documentation was found on the quantity of garments made at home in New Zealand during the 1950s, the studied garments suggest the quantity was high... 42.9% of the garments studied were home-made and 9.7% were dressmaker made. Combined, over half the garments in this sample were potentially being produced outside the mass production arena (Judson, 1999, p.83).

Judson notes that the highest percentage of garment types produced by dressmakers was those that required the most skill, namely formal dresses, and coats. Judson’s personal communications revealed that:

During the 1950s there were a large number of women in the community who were termed as ‘friendly’ dressmakers. These were women who had some garment construction skills and who didn’t mind sewing for others. They might not even have charged for it. These women fall under the home dressmaker category rather than dressmaker category as the equipment available is likely to have been of domestic standard and most would not have ‘dressmaker’ training, such as having served apprenticeships or worked in a workroom that taught and used dressmaking skills (Judson, 1999, pp.85-86).

The Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection is generally acknowledged as the most comprehensive dress collection in New Zealand. Its emphasis is placed firmly on New Zealand made garments and on “everyday” clothing, rather than exclusively evening or special occasion clothing. Quéréé and Wood contend that the collection details the development and burgeoning of the New Zealand fashion and ready-to-wear clothing industries from the 1920s to the 1980s. They claim that the collection is “singularly well informed and accurate as to what was available, and what was actually purchased and worn” (2003, p.73). If the collection is seen as representative of the clothing worn by New Zealand women at this time, then it indicates that the contribution of dressmaking was substantial.

According to Quéréé and Wood (2003, p.52) the collection:

Illustrates the importance of homemade garments in twentieth century New Zealand, particularly as influenced by the teaching of dressmaking and needlework skills within the school system. The collection contains numerous examples of fashionable and quite complex garments that have clearly been made by home dressmakers or professional dressmakers working outside the mechanised clothing industry.
While the sample that Judson selected represents only the 1950s, the high percentage of dressmaker garments is true of the entire collection. Quéréé and Woods concluding remarks would also seem to support the view that the dressmaking trade was a significant producer of apparel.

In 20th century New Zealand from the 1920s to ca (sic) 1980, the majority of people bought their clothes ready-made from retail outlets, or had them made (or made them at home) from commercial paper patterns (Quéréé & Wood, 2003, p.73).

This statement certainly supports the writer’s perception that, in post-war New Zealand, up to the late 1970s / early 1980s, dressmakers were highly productive, within the context of making one-off individualised garments, and were particularly significant producers of special occasion clothing, such as ballgowns and wedding gowns. As such, dressmakers had the distinction of seeing or reading about their work in print, even if their names were not mentioned. Up until the late 1970s, it was a common practice for newspapers to provide full accounts of wedding proceedings, often with very comprehensive descriptions of the garments worn by the bride, bridesmaids, mother of the bride, mother of the groom, and the bride’s “going away” outfit. The following examples are taken from the 1930s, 1960s and 1970s.

Mr L Fountaine escorted his sister (the bride), who wore a charming gown of orchid mauve crepe jeanette. The bodice, which was moulded to the figure, formed a double hip-yoke, and was finished with a Medici collar of silver lace and long tight-fitting sleeves with deep pointed cuffs of the lace. The skirt was composed of long fluted godets inset with shaped overlays of the silver lace and fell almost to the ground, just showing her dainty mauve satin slippers. An orchid mauve silk net veil was held over the head by three strands of orange blossoms and was arranged to form a very long train … (the bridesmaid) was attractively attired in peach-shaded georgette. Her frock was designed with close fitting bodice and V-shaped décolletage, and finished with a narrow stitched belt clasped with a rhinestone buckle. The sleeves were long and tight, with a flare falling from elbow to wrist. From a quaint peplum the full circular skirt flowed in a widely-flared hem-line to the ground. Slippers of satin repeated the colour of the frock. A becoming capeline felt hat trimmed with a splash bow of ring velvet of the same dainty shade was worn with the brim turned off the face. …

(The bride’s mother) received the guests wearing a graceful gown of navy satin beaute, the bodice featuring a bolero effect in trimmings of self material with a narrow belt caught with a buckle at the waist. The straight skirt was finished with a flounced hem-line, and she wore a black straw hat with swathed crown of satin. (The aunt of the bridegroom) wore a flared frock of black celanese, the bodice lightened with a tucked vest of deep parchment tinted georgette and a hat of black plum with diamante buckle. …

When (the bride and groom) left for the north on their wedding tour, the (bride) donned an attractive frock of reseda green wool repp. The plain bodice had a neat vestee of biskra satin trimmed with tiny green buttons and fell to a flared skirt with a wide box-pleated front. With this was worn a navy blue...
face-cloth coat, the collar & cuffs being of brown fox fur, and a small navy felt hat finished with hatter’s plush (Timaru Herald, 29 August 1931, p. unknown).

The following description describes the garments of the wedding party of the bride featured in Image Sixty-One (p. 288):

The bride, who was given away by her father, wore a gown of white Chantilly lace over American slipper satin. The fitting bodice featured a self scalloped neckline and long sleeves pointed over the wrists. The reedingote style skirt, with the lace scallops falling away from a pointed waistline into a long train, showed deep frills of nylon tulle. The triple tiered finger-tip length tulle veil, worn over the face on entering the church was held in place by a half-circle of clematis flowers … The ‘maids … were frocked alike in lovely gowns of fiesta pink satin, the fitting bodices having boat-shaped necklines and three-quarter sleeves. The full skirts were mounted over stiffened underskirts and featured crossed pleats back and front. … At the reception … the bride’s mother received the guests wearing a royal blue double knit jersey suit, a royal blue and white hat with accessories to tone. … She was assisted by the ‘groom’s mother, who chose a dark blue and white fleck tweed jacket frock worn with toning accessories. For travelling the bride changed into an ensemble of royal blue tweed flecked with white, the straight skirt being worn under a three-quarter length coat (Gisborne Herald, 25 June 1962, p. unknown).

The fashions of the 1970s were reflected in the dress of the wedding party described in the Gisborne Herald:

The bride and groom arrived and walked into the church together. The bride was wearing a long dress of deep purple Lisa crepe, the long sleeves gathered into 1in cuffs, and a stand-up collar of the same width as the cuffs. The waisted dress, with an A line skirt, featured a corset piece with a sun-ray effect in mauve and cream, was worn under a cream guipure lace coat, panelled and falling into a slight train, with short sleeves and a hood, buttoned across the corset with five pearl buttons. The bride wore embroidered linen shoes in multi colours on wooden platform soles. … The bride’s mother wore a full-length gown of Chinese green pure wool georgette, panelled, with button-through style and revers, closed with tiny diamante buttons, and matching buttons fastening the cuffs of the long sleeves, while the belt featured a diamante buckle. … The bridegroom’s mother chose a long gown of deep brown and orange crimp-jersey, with long fitting sleeves, the fitted top featuring a soft pleated frill around the neck and wrists, while the skirt was slightly gathered (Gisborne Herald, 5 June 1973, p. unknown).

Regional publications such as Photo News included numerous photographs of wedding groups. For example, the 18 July 1973 issue of the Gisborne edition of Photo News featured photographs of twenty-four weddings. Dressmaker MH recalled that, even though the dressmaker wasn’t named, in a small community many people knew who had made the gowns (MH, personal interview, February 2000).
8.3 DEREGULATION OF THE NEW ZEALAND APPAREL INDUSTRY

New Zealanders voted in their fourth Labour Government in 1984 and, during its six year tenure, this government made “difficult and overdue” decisions to modernise the New Zealand economy (“NZ Labour”, n.d.). From 1986 onwards, government policy favoured the encouragement of competition through the removal of barriers to international trade. The importation of garments and textile products up to this era had been controlled by a stringent import licensing regime and by the imposition of high tariffs that ensured that imported goods were not competitively priced in comparison to locally manufactured goods. The Tariff Act of 1988 (The Statutes of New Zealand, 1988, p.1359) legislated for the systematic reduction of tariffs on a wide range of imported goods, including textiles, clothing and accessories, headgear, and footwear. The 1995 New Zealand Official Yearbook summarised the effect on the textile and apparel sectors as follows:

Textiles and apparel were amongst the last product groups to retain import licensing (licensing was removed from textiles by July 1991 and from apparel by July 1992). The import licensing regime covering these products significantly restricted the levels of imported textiles and apparel and therefore limited the extent to which the industries were exposed to international competition. The tariff reduction programmes for these industries have also been more gradual than those for most other industries, with tariffs on apparel imports in particular remaining significantly higher than those for most other industrial goods (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1995, pp.476-477).

The removal of import licensing and the reduction in tariffs led to increases in apparel imports, from a value of eighty-four million dollars in 1988 to three hundred and twenty-three million dollars in 1993, and to eight hundred and sixty million dollars in 2001, with sixty-nine per cent of the imports coming from China (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1995, pp.476-477; New Zealand Official Yearbook, 2004, pp.373-374). The 2004 Official Yearbook recorded that “this had led to considerable rationalisation within the industry, with an accompanying reduction in employment levels” (ibid).
A 1998 Industry Sector Analysis Report on the New Zealand apparel industry, prepared by Standards New Zealand, noted that, following the deregulation of the New Zealand economy, restructuring of the apparel industry from 1986:

… had led to a significant decline in the number of New Zealand based apparel manufacturing companies and a rationalisation of all related industry sub-sectors … The removal of tariff barriers up to 1997 has been met with an increase in apparel imports from all international sources. In 1990, the volume of apparel imports was 32.3 million units … These figures increased to an import volume of 141.4 million units … in 1998 (Standards New Zealand, 1998, pp.1-2).

Lobbying by the apparel industry sector stalled the rate at which tariffs were being reduced to allow the industry more time to restructure. The 2004 Official Yearbook reported that:

In the period 1988 to 2000, tariffs were significantly reduced and New Zealand’s tariff profile has reached the point where it has one of the lowest average rates in OECD* countries at 4.1% … The highest (remaining) ad valorem tariff rates of between 17 and 19% (including clothing) will reduce gradually to 10% by 1 July 2009 … it was recognised (that previous tariff reductions) had imposed significant adjustment pressures on industries, particularly the textile, footwear, and clothing industries (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 2004, p.370).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the negativity surrounding the future of New Zealand’s apparel industry was very tangible and very pervasive. As the impact of the removal of tariffs on imported garments took effect,ix clothing manufacturing companies seemed to be closing down or drastically reducing staff numbers on a weekly basis. From personal experience, as an educator in a fashion department in the early 1990s, there was a distinct perception that there might not be any need for fashion programmes in the near future, or that survival of fashion schools would depend on the introduction of programmes that reflected dramatically adjusted focus and content.x

As New Zealand embraced free trade principles and there was a general acceptance that protectionism had to come to an end, the apparel industry could not expect to be exempt. However, the pace at which tariffs were removed and the speed at which cheap imported garments entered the New Zealand market, caused many local companies to despair. Paul Blomfield, former Chief Executive Officer of the Apparel and Textile Federation, campaigned
vigorously on behalf of the New Zealand industry to slow the pace of tariff removal. He was quoted as saying in 2001 that he was “sick of sounding like a whinger … we’re not saying bring back protectionism. All we’re saying is don’t strip away existing tariffs, now 15 to 19 per cent from a high of 65 per cent that … effectively doubled the cost of imported clothing” (Larsen, 2001, p.53). Blomfield added that, the number of people employed in the New Zealand apparel industry dropped from almost thirty-five thousand in 1985 to about eighteen thousand in 1994. By 1998, the apparel industry was reputedly employing half the number than it had in 1985 (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1995, p.478; Fashion ‘94, 1994, p.21; Larson, 2001, p.53). The New Zealand Official Yearbook of 2004 (pp.373-374) recorded that, “the textile and apparel industries remain significant employers, however, in 2001 employing sixteen thousand, one hundred people.” This total represents the number employed in textiles, clothing, footwear, and leather manufacturing. The most recent estimate (March 2007) of the number employed in the clothing industry alone is eight thousand four hundred people (Tollemache, B., personal communication, 8 March 2007).

The figures reflect major changes in the way in which apparel is currently produced in New Zealand. Traditionally, up to the late 1980s, the great majority of manufacturing occurred onshore, with companies maintaining in-house staff skilled in the processes of design, pattern drafting, cutting, sample machining, machining, finishing, and pressing. A strong infrastructure existed to support this manufacturing base; for example, fabric importers, fabric printers and dyers, haberdashery suppliers, pleaters, and cut, make and trim operations. *Her Business* reports that:

The surviving manufacturers, who found themselves collectively labelled “a sunset industry”, recognised that globalisation was a beast they couldn’t defeat, so they had better join it. A dramatic industry makeover took place and local labels turned their focus to what they could compete effectively in – high-quality design and niche clothing, rather than mass-manufacturing (*Her Business*, November/December 2004, p.33).
While the current (2007) clothing industry employment figures mentioned above would seem to indicate a very bleak prognosis for the future of this industry, the export figures suggest a much more positive outlook. Exports of clothing were valued at twenty-nine million dollars in 1989; one hundred and sixty-two million dollars in 1993; two hundred and twenty-two million dollars in 2001; and two hundred and sixty million dollars in 2002, of which forty million dollars was earned from designer clothing. Designer apparel at that time was estimated to constitute an eleven per cent share of all apparel exports (including knitted textiles) (New Zealand Official Yearbook, 2004, pp. 373-374; Blomfield, 2002, p.2; Larson, 2001, p.53; Curin-Birch, 2003, p.66). In October 2004, Janetta Mackay reported in the *New Zealand Herald* that, “apparel is now a leading New Zealand export, just short of wine. In the year to this June (2004), total apparel exports were $302 million, up 7.5 per cent in a year compared with the 2 per cent the country’s exports grew overall” (Mackay, 18 October 2004, p.A19).

These major changes in the apparel industry occurred after the time period in focus for the dressmakers in this study. When the timeframe was determined, it was assumed that deregulation in the late 1980s would have affected demand for their dressmaker product. However, it is apparent that they continued to produce alongside the larger fashion business, just as they had during the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s. It appears that the niche market that dressmakers had traditionally catered for was still in existence.

Investigation of this era of restructuring led the researcher to reflect on personal experiences of employment during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Recollections of relevance to this study are presented in the first person:

> From 1986 to 1991 my work consisted mainly of making patterns for women’s wear manufacturers. I consistently made the patterns for the seasonal ranges of five or six companies. The ranges were composed of ten to thirty different garments, depending on the manufacturer. Few patterns were drafted
from original designs; most garments were copies of apparel purchased overseas. After samples were made and fitted at the manufacturers’ premises, the patterns were returned to me for adjustment and grading. The resulting garments were all manufactured in New Zealand. There was an abundance of work and it was very lucrative. I also had several opportunities to design ranges and make patterns and samples for small new companies establishing themselves as manufacturers of high fashion leather clothing, maternity wear, and lingerie.

In addition, I had a loyal clientele of women who were either in business, or had very active social lives, or both, who commissioned the design and making of made-to-measure garments. The clients generally requested tailored suits and evening gowns, but day dresses and casual clothing were also popular. I also made wedding gowns, but they were not the mainstay of my “couture” work. As I only ever employed a machinist on a part-time basis, I consider that I was, in effect, a “designer/dressmaker” when I worked for private, non-commercial clients. My practice was remarkably similar to that of the interviewed dressmakers, except that I sketched designs for my clients. The clients generally provided their own fabrics and, occasionally, a commercial pattern.

I was aware that I was not the only designer, patternmaker, designer/dressmaker working in a freelance capacity in Auckland. In fact, initially, there was such an abundance of work that it was common practice to refer companies and private clients to colleagues when unable to accommodate another order. I do not recall the work dwindling as we entered the 1990s, although less of the work came from larger manufacturers. At this time, I started to work in education and my new career eventually consumed all of my time.

8.4 THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE NEW ZEALAND APPAREL INDUSTRY

Over recent years, the New Zealand apparel industry appears to have attained an era of stabilisation. Employment numbers in the industry have been maintained, from an estimate of eight thousand, two hundred in 2004 to an estimate of eight thousand, four hundred in 2007 (Tollemache, B., personal communication, July 2004 and March 2007). New Zealand Fashion Week has become an established annual event since 2001. Design labels such as Karen Walker and Trelise Cooper have consolidated their places in the market and introduced new revenue streams. There are indications of the adoption of recent international trends that have seen high-end designers designing ranges for chain stores; for example Liz Mitchell designing “Mitchell” for Farmers’. Young and up and coming designers are being nurtured in programmes such as the Verge Breakthrough Designer Group, which provides mentoring to new designers prior to showing at New Zealand Fashion Week, and through annual events such as the Vodafone ID Dunedin Emerging Designers Awards. The establishment of broader export opportunities by design-led companies and the continuing presence of
international media at Fashion Week has been instrumental in creating an international reputation for New Zealand fashion design.

The development of this reputation had its beginnings in 1997 when, for the first time, a group of New Zealand designers showed their collections at Mercedes Australian Fashion Week (Geary, 2001, p.124). A larger contingent of New Zealand designers featured at the 1998 Mercedes Australian Fashion Week and won considerable international praise.

Indeed, the New Zealand collections … garnered rapturous praise. “New Zealanders have a darker outlook and are less show-offy”, said Marcus Von Ackermann, then chief fashion editor of Vogue Paris. “Having seen some of the New Zealand collections, I must say that’s where the unique creativity is coming from”, declared Lucia van der Post, a fashion writer for London’s Financial Times at the time … Even the interests of the most discerning fashionistas were piqued – Anna Piaggi, Vogue Italia’s eccentric stylist, ran about all week wildly enthusing about the country’s designs (Schaer, August 2001, p.134).

There on the Sydney runways it seemed that NZ had something different. “A darker outlook, more intellectual…”, “a unique creativity…”, “fresh and new, not derivative…”, and “a formidable design force…” were some of the comments from Italian Vogue, French Vogue and Women’s Wear Daily. Tyler Brûlé, notoriously stylish founder of Wallpaper magazine, even described what he’d seen as “the new Belgium”, Belgium being the birthplace of international design talents like Anne Demeulemeester and Martin Margiela (Schaer, October 2001, p.32).

Following such widespread approval, four of the New Zealand labels featured; Zambesi, Karen Walker, Nom’d, and World; were invited to take part in London Fashion Week in 1999, beating seventy European contenders for an opportunity to show at this event. For Auckland label World, this event heralded international recognition that ultimately led to the purchase of their entire range by Selfridges, and to considerable sales growth throughout Asia, the United Kingdom, Europe and Australia (McKay, 2001, p.27). According to Anne Chappaz, apparel client manager at New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, the government body responsible for the promotion of New Zealand products in the international marketplace, the New Zealand designers “got the media to sit up and take notice – and once the mainstream media began to give New Zealand design coverage, people wanted to know more about it” (Curin-Birch, 2003, p.66). New Zealand designers continued to attract international interest and to receive orders from prestigious retailers such as Liberty’s and Selfridges in the United
Kingdom, Barneys in New York, and David Jones and Myer in Australia. The timing seemed to be auspicious for New Zealand to stage its own fashion week, and the impetus to bring the proposal to fruition came from former fashion journalist and fashion show producer and co-ordinator Pieter Stewart (Larson, 2001, p.51).

Stewart spent two years planning and organising the inaugural New Zealand Fashion Week, co-ordinating designers, sponsors, trade exhibitors, and government agencies that invested financial and strategic support. The L’Oreal Inaugural New Zealand Fashion Week was held in Auckland over six days in October 2001. The October date was selected to allow winter collections to be shown, to complement the showing of summer ranges in Australia in May. Forty-seven designers were featured, international media and buyers attended, and the event was considered to be a great success (Geary, 2001, p.124; Larson, 2001, pp.51-52). New Zealand Fashion Week maintained its October date from 2002 to 2005, and moved to a September date in 2006. New York fashion publicist Brian Long said of the 2002 event:

I really didn’t know what to expect when I came over because, to be honest, I knew very little about New Zealand fashion, but what I saw really amazed me. New Zealand is truly a creative enclave where all designers tend to be carrying out their artistic or creative energies with little to no influence from outside their world. This is seen by the drastically diverse collections from over 100 different designers, who range from creating ultra-feminine collections to ultra-rugged ones (Curin-Birch, 2003, p.70).

The value of New Zealand Fashion Week to the country is evident from reports that the 2003 event generated twenty-three point two million dollars for the New Zealand economy (Apparel, October 2004, p.8; Her Business, November/December 2004, p.33). New Zealand designers have subsequently become media darlings; household names; celebrities who are regularly featured in articles in newspapers, fashion magazines, and women’s magazines. Vogue Australia devoted over thirty pages in its August 2001 issue to a “NZ Special” feature. Its editor, Kirstie Clements, said of the Vogue visit to New Zealand:

It’s a well-acknowledged fact that the New Zealanders are a force to be reckoned with in the global world of fashion and design, but to be faced with such a prodigious amount of creativity in one week was overwhelming. We arrived in Auckland on a perfect autumn day and proceeded to discover one startling individual after another (Clements, 2001, p.16).
New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, in its former incarnation as Industry New Zealand, recognised that the designer fashion industry was growing rapidly and, in 2002, commissioned Paul Blomfield to undertake a scoping study to provide “a snapshot of the current state of the industry including its strengths and weaknesses” (Blomfield, 2002, p.1).

The report concluded in summary that this sector is:

…characterised by small companies that place a high emphasis on design and creativity, selling clothing (often through their own retail stores) to high socio-economic sector of the community (sic) … The industry is predominantly focused on women’s clothing, but a few companies supply menswear … Most companies selected for study had participated in a major fashion event during the past five years (Blomfield, 2002, p.2).

The report also noted that, “in terms of age, 13% of respondent companies had established prior to 1980, 25% in the 1980s, 66% in the 1990s. 13% had established since 2000” (Blomfield, 2000, p.3).

Progressively, a number of the larger apparel companies in particular, have chosen to have their product made in Asia at a greatly reduced cost, and to generally maintain little more than a design, sampling and marketing operation in New Zealand (Larsen, 2001, p.53). Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in 2007, smaller, design-led companies do not see offshore production as ideal for their product, preferring to have access to the fast turnaround, rapidly reactive, suited to short runs, advantages of local production. This view is supported by the assertion in Her Business that:

Today, manufacturing is done both offshore and domestically, with the majority of high-end fashion remaining New Zealand-made. Our most successful apparel exporters have developed niche and high-end products or skilled distribution processes to enable them to stay competitive (Her Business, November/December 2004, p.33).

Certainly Blomfield’s findings in the designer fashion industry scoping study confirm this in 2002:

Companies in this segment are largely on-shore manufacturers, with only 14% of respondents producing garments offshore … Most designer fashion companies rely on contract manufacture for the bulk of garment production … Only 11% of companies made all of their garments on-site. 48% made a
proportion of garments onsite (sic) … and 41% of respondents made NO garments on-site (Blomfield, 2002, p.3).

The perception is that there is currently a high demand for quality outworkers and cut, make and trim businesses, and for experienced pattern makers, cutters, and sample machinists. The scoping study indicated in 2002 that lack of quality short-run production capability and the pressure that contractors were under for production at peak times in the season, were issues affecting the industry then and likely to remain issues in the future (Blomfield, 2002, p.4). This demand potentially has been created by the international reputation that New Zealand fashion designers now have.

The New Zealand public are no longer informed solely about the designers’ clothes; they can read about the design of their homes, the births of their children, and even their battles with illness. Denise L’Estrange-Corbet of World and Karen Walker have both appeared in television advertisements. In 2003 and 2004 Kate Sylvester and Karen Walker designed T-shirts for sale by chain store retailer Glassons, to raise funds for breast cancer research. This has also become an annual practice that has grown to include the designs of a number of established designers and a selection of student designers’ work. In 2004, Air New Zealand, the country’s national carrier, commissioned designer fashion company Zambesi to design new uniforms for their in-flight crew and ground staff.

By October 2003, New Zealand fashion writer Stacy Gregg felt sufficiently confident about the interest in New Zealand designers to publish a book about them. Undressed: New Zealand Fashion Designers Tell Their Stories features fifteen designers whom Gregg considered to be “the most exciting, directional and influential fashion arbiters working in New Zealand today … I wanted fashion talents who have been on the scene long enough to
have a meaty story to tell” (Gregg, 2003, *Sunday Star-Times*, “Sunday” section, p.8). Gregg also said:

> With the third annual L’Oréal New Zealand Fashion Week almost upon us, it’s amazing how far we’ve come in such a short time. In the past 10 years fashion designers have gone from being fringe-dwelling kooks virtually ignored by big business to being hailed as vivid examples of entrepreneurial success. *Undressed* is – I suppose – a symbol of that success. I hope it continues and that in a few years time I’ll be writing a sequel (Gregg, 2003, *Sunday Star-Times*, “Sunday” section, p.8).

The interest in New Zealand fashion was showing no signs of abating in 2004, with local and Australian interest continuing to grow. Gregg reported in the *Sunday Star-Times* that New Zealand designers were so popular in Australia that iconic rival department stores Myer and David Jones were competing to stock New Zealand labels. She listed local labels Trelise Cooper, Tanya Carlson, Zambesi, Karen Walker, and Kate Sylvester as the talent that the two stores had been courting, keen to establish or continue exclusivity contracts to one or other store. Trelise Cooper was quoted as saying, “the penetration of New Zealand labels in Australia now is incredible” (Gregg, 2004, *Sunday Star-Times*, “Sunday” section, p.11).

Currently New Zealand designer fashion is undoubtedly in a strong growth phase but, it is worth remembering that it still represents no more than twenty per cent of export value. The “old” companies, such as Cambridge Clothing Limited, and Rembrandt Suits Limited, and the specialist sportswear, outdoor clothing, and lingerie and swimwear companies continue to generate the bulk of export earnings.

And what of dressmakers and their part in clothing production in the twenty-first century? They do still exist, seemingly mainly in the bridal and ballgown markets. The 2006 Auckland telephone directory, serving a city with a population of one point four million, has forty entries in the “Dressmakers” listing. There are sixty-seven entries in the “Bridal Wear” category; many of which state that they do made-to-measure work. Enquiry at retail fabric stores confirmed that they maintain a list of dressmakers, to satisfy fabric buyers’ requests for
the name of someone who could sew for them. Personal communication with three colleagues who work as dressmakers in Auckland, two from home and one from business premises, confirmed that they consistently have work, although there are indications that the practice of buying fabric and having the garments made by a dressmaker, or making the garments oneself, is in decline. Several fabric retail businesses or departments have completely disappeared or closed some stores in their chains in the past few years. In 1999 / 2000, Queen Street, the main retail strip of Auckland’s city centre, had four fabric retail shops or departments. There were none remaining by 2004. This trend had its beginnings shortly after the free market economy allowed for the importation of cheaper clothing from 1985. When Wellington’s oldest department store, Kirkcaldie and Stains Limited, undertook a massive reconstruction of the store in 1989, the dressmaking workroom was one of the departments that was not included in the new plan. The dress fabrics department was maintained but, when management attempted to revive this area, they found too many negative factors affecting the market. Image Sixty-Two (p.288) shows the store’s extensive dress fabric department in the early 1950s.

Dress fabrics – once the cornerstone of a drapery business – were discontinued … import licensing had all but disappeared, as had the price and wage controls imposed in the Muldoon era. Discount operators were ubiquitous, as cheap, ready-made clothing flooded in from Asia and the Pacific. Home dressmaking, once the norm in New Zealand, became uneconomic. Kirkcaldie’s finally closed down its dress fabrics department early in 1993 (Millen, 2000, p.218).

The announcement in June 2004 that Auckland retailer Smith and Caughey Limited would be closing its fabric department after one hundred and twenty-four years of operation, was met with some sadness by its customers. Managing Director Andrew Caughey is reported as saying:

We’re probably as sad as everybody to see it go, but we just have to face the reality that it is a category that is dying. If you look at department stores around the world, it has just disappeared over the last 10 to 20 years … Forty to 50 years ago, import licensing restrictions meant you couldn’t easily bring ready-made garments in, so you had no option but to buy fabric and make up. From what I have been told, at one time people would queue up and it used to be a mad rush to buy the fabrics before they were sold out (Kohler, 2004, p.A4).
Caughey attributed the demise of home sewing to the busy pace of life of contemporary women and to the extensive choice of ready-made garments.

A negative view would contend that, if the closure of dress fabric retail outlets continues, it will constitute a very real threat to the future of this type of dressmaking, because it has been established practice for clients to purchase and supply their own fabric. Currently, it is impossible to predict what will happen in the future.

8.5 ACKNOWLEDGING A TRADITION OF SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

On a positive note, the continuity of tradition and skills is reflected in the uniqueness and success of New Zealand fashion at the moment. Craftsmanship is a focus of current design, with an emphasis on beading, embroidery, appliqué, and intricate cutting. New Zealand fashion designers acknowledge that they consistently take their inspiration from the silhouettes and crafts of earlier periods. Designers have referred to their attractions to Victorian beading and needlework; to the intricate design and cut practised by Madeline Vionnet; to the inspiration drawn from vintage clothing; and to style icons as diverse as Coco Chanel, Amelia Earhart, and the Mitford girls (Vogue Australia, November 2004, pp.172-178).

For many of the designers, additional inspiration is drawn from an even deeper resource, with their pursuit of a career in fashion representing the continuation of a family involvement in the production of apparel. Sisters Elisabeth Findlay of Zambesi and Margi Robertson of Nom.D, give credit to their mother Zinovia for the development of their interest in fashion. Zinovia was passionate about clothes, worked as a seamstress for several tailoring manufacturers, and taught her daughters to sew. Continuity is maintained in the next
generation as Elisabeth Findlay’s daughters work in fashion photography, fashion make-up, and film direction, often working for the Zambesi label (Gregg, 2003, p.49, 192, 193; Urbis, Spring 2004, p.81). Karen Walker recalls that both her mother and grandmother were “stylish” and they both sewed. Walker remembers that her mother was a very glamorous dresser in the 1970s, and Walker herself loved to wear vintage clothes as a young teenager, then progressing to making her own clothes (Simpson, September 2003, p.27).

Designer Doris de Pont traces her interest in fashion to her family background. “My mother was from a family of tailors and my father from a family of shoe people … so I guess I have all the family vices” (Gregg, 2003, pp.138-139). Caroline Church, co-designer for the State of Grace label, told Stacey Gregg, “I come from a family of dressmakers – my mother’s sister was a milliner, my great-great-grandfather was a tailor and my mother was a needlework teacher” (Gregg, 2003, p.151). Her business partner and co-designer, Sherilyn Catchpole, said, “My mother’s sister was a milliner and her nana was a tailor. My sisters and I learned to sew quite young – about nine or 10 (sic) I think” (Gregg, 2003, p.152). Marilyn Sainty began her design career in the 1970s, building on a background of making her own clothes. She describes herself as self-taught, but acknowledges that both her mother and grandmother had sewn (Gregg, 2003, p.182). And young designer Tulia Wilson, who started her fashion career with Zambesi, refers to both Elisabeth Findlay and her grandmother as her design heroes. “My grandmother is one of my heroes. She is a milliner by trade, and never leaves home without her hat and gloves. She’s an extraordinary designer and craftsperson and always inspires me” (Urbis, Spring 2004, p.75).

Sydney designer Lee Mathews, who grew up in New Zealand, attributes her sewing, patternmaking, and craft skills to patient tuition by her grandmother:
My grandmother was the most practical person I had ever met, her ability to ‘whip something up’ was so fantastic, I just had to be able to do it! She liked to use beautiful fabric but often couldn’t afford it herself so her clothes were always cotton things with little adornments and trims, which I really liked. Nana taught me to sew on her Singer treadle machine and how to hand sew a hem, etc. Knitting was never my favourite thing to do but she did teach me to embroider which I still love (Mathews, L., personal communication, 10 July 2006).

The Lee Mathews label has been described as having “a delightfully naïve aesthetic and old world craftsmanship” (Pow, 2006, p.250), and celebrating “the intricate handiwork, materials and patterns of the past” (Oliver, 2006, p.12). Mathews distinctly remembers the first garments that she made:

It was a long muslin dress with flowers printed around the hem. I was very big on printing onto fabric, making my own prints for clothing. It was very simple with flared sleeves and a drawstring under the bust. The next outfit was out of calico and also printed and then dyed. It was a skirt, with no zip, just buttons, which were badly attached and all fell off except one … and a little top, drawstring neck and short sleeves. I think I dyed it blue, to sort of go with these little South American looking shoes that I had (Mathews, L., personal communication, 10 July 2006).

Her grandmother was self-taught and worked from home in her sewing room, cutting patterns to the clients’ measurements, fitting on a dressmaker’s dummy, and doing the final fitting on the client before sewing the entire garment together. Mathews said, “I just loved being able to make things, all things, and (my grandmother) was instrumental in demonstrating how that can be done” (Mathews, L., personal communication, 10 July 2006).

The designers’ references to past practices are perhaps congruent with Molloy’s identification of elements of nostalgia in the work of New Zealand fashion designers during the period of their entry into the international arena. Molloy sought to identify the rationale behind the “gothic, confrontational, and nostalgic basis” of New Zealand fashion design at that time. She asked “what was “in the air”, what was the quintessential “cultural concept” in New Zealand in the 1990s which produced this distinctive New Zealand style?” (Molloy, 2004, p.486). Molloy noted:

The over-arching sociocultural-political reality of the 1990s was a move to the political right, secured by the election of the neo-liberal National Party in 1990. Although the previous Labour-led government had introduced a raft of neo-liberal reforms in the mid- to late 1980s, the National Party accelerated the pace of these and amplified moralized discourse around them … While New Zealanders have generally
resisted the impulse towards moral regulation that accompanied this rightward move, one of the ways in which a moral conservative impulse was manifested was a marked rise, and even an official adoption, of nostalgia … Nostalgia manifests itself as a yearning for a “simpler” or “better” time … However, nostalgia can take different forms. In the case of New Zealand style two aspects of nostalgia are evident. The first is nostalgia for a particular class/gender/power formation. This is evidenced in the references to upper-class European lifestyle of the past, and in the purported “masculinity” of many of the designs. The use of men’s suits and trousers, military clothing, traditional tailoring, and boyswear evokes the tradition of masculine power, ironically usurped for women’s clothing.

The second and more surprising nostalgia is for stability and lack of change, a quest for classicism in design. This is evident in the tailoring and masculinity of the clothing, as well as in the philosophies of the designers (Molloy, 2004, pp.486-487).

Because the interviewed dressmakers did not work in mass manufacturing companies (apart from JSM and IG who worked briefly for Lane, Walker, Rudkin and Bendon Industries Limited, respectively), their methods of manufacture were not, and could not, be mass production methods. They learned their skills in organisations where they were taught to make complete garments and where a high proportion of handwork was included in the process. Therefore, any influence that they had on subsequent generations would have to have come from their individualised garment-making experience. Although no direct links have been established from the dressmakers interviewed to current fashion designers, evidence would suggest that their experiences would undoubtedly be similar to those of the family members who these designers acknowledge as mentors and sources of inspiration.

It is likely that many New Zealand designers have close links to the practice of dressmaking within their own families due to the longevity of dressmaking practice in New Zealand. Apparel production, particularly during the 1940s, 50s and 60s, was primarily concerned with satisfying the mass market and less concerned with offering originality and variety. The size of the domestic market; the sole market for most of the producers at this time; inhibited the potential to translate current high fashion, such as Paris fashion, into mass production ranges. Women who wanted to dress fashionably or to reflect their individuality, or women who were
of an unusual size or shape, were forced to go to small boutique businesses or to dressmakers to fulfil those requirements.

The respect that many designers express for the knowledge and skills that their forebears possessed, and the acknowledgement of the legacy that they have inherited, suggests that the designers will be instrumental in ensuring the preservation of dressmaking skills and craft in the future. There are indications that this respect will also continue with the young designers of the future. The researcher has observed real enthusiasm among fashion students for the handcrafted techniques of past practice that could reasonably be referred to as “dressmaker” techniques. Current fashion trends are referencing the designs of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1950s, and fashion students have embraced the “looks” of these decades and re-interpreted them in unique ways. Their abilities to blend contemporary techniques, textiles, and technologies with the intricacies of dressmaker practices suggest that the future looks secure for maintaining the integrity and craft of dressmaking in fashion.

NOTES

i “Fashion” is defined as “a prevailing and often short-lived custom or style; the prevailing custom or style especially in dress”, (Allen (Ed.), 2000, p.503), or “the way of dressing or behaving that is usual or popular at a certain time”, (Summers (Ed.), 1992, p.463). Most of the large-scale clothing manufacturers producing sportswear, hosiery, and lingerie garments, were not producing “fashion” garments but, by the late 1960s and 1970s, there were many New Zealand operations that regarded themselves as producers of “fashion” apparel.


iii Census figures for women in “Dressmaking, sewing, not otherwise defined” or “Tailoring, dressmaking, not otherwise defined”, in the post-war period, are as follows:
1945 - three thousand, five hundred and eighty-six
1956 - two thousand, eight hundred and eight
1961 - one thousand, six hundred and ninety-five
1966 - one thousand, two hundred and twenty-one
1976 - one thousand, six hundred and twelve. The 1976 census saw a change of category from “Dressmaking, sewing” to “Tailoring, dressmaking”.

iv Between 1945 and 1976, the female labour force grew at twice the rate of the male labour force and, by 1976, 56.7% of working women were married. By 1979, one-third of all married women worked more than twenty hours per week. Between 1951 and 1976, the proportion of women aged from fifteen to sixty-four who were at work, had almost doubled to 46% (Gillespie in Bunkle and Hughes, 1980, pp.103-104).

v There is no evidence of this but, if the responses from the interviewed dressmakers are taken as an indication, approximately half of that group did not officially declare their occupations and incomes.

vi The 1953 New Zealand Official Yearbook also includes figures from clothing factories for the “Value of
Output, being the amount charged for making up clients’ materials” - £2,463,955 in 1949-50 (p. 552).

As a Master of Arts student, Judson examined a selection of garments from the Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection held by Canterbury Museum. Her contextual research, and her evaluations of the 1950s garments drawn from the collection, led her to the conclusion that most of the apparel product available in this era was locally made.

OECD means “Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development”.

In 1988, the New Zealand government announced tariff changes that would see a sliding reduction of import protection, from 65% in 1988 to the current rate of 19% in 2004 (Her Business, November/December 2004, p.33).

Ultimately, the introduction of a dramatic change of focus became the strategy of most fashion education providers. The emphasis shifted from the promotion of technical skills in certificate programmes to the focus on design, business practice, and marketing skills offered in diploma and degree programmes.

This figure seems to be an over-estimation, given that the 1980 New Zealand Official Yearbook records the number of employees at 21,989 (p. 444) and the 1988-89 New Zealand Official Yearbook puts the number of persons engaged at 26,862 as at February 1987 (p. 607).

Karen Walker has introduced sunglasses and jewellery lines and collaborated with iconic New Zealand company Swandri to produce ranges; Trelise Cooper has started a children’s wear line.

Liz Mitchell’s association with Farmers reflects a trend that has seen Kate Moss designing for Topshop in the United Kingdom, and Stella McCartney for Target in Australia.

The designers selected to show at the 1997 Mercedes Australian Fashion Week were Moontide, Wallace Rose, Zambesi, and World.

Designers showing at the 1998 Mercedes Australian Fashion Week included Zambesi, Karen Walker, Kate Sylvester, Nom’d, and World.

New Zealand Trade and Enterprise is the government’s trade and economic development agency. According to Curin-Birch (2003, p.66) it has “identified designer fashion, outdoor clothing and children’s clothing as sectors where New Zealand is globally competitive.”

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Image Forty-Five: A dress pattern for a 1950s sundress.
Image Forty-Seven: The New Zealand Woman’s Weekly continued to offer fashion advice to its readers throughout the 1950s.
Image Fifty-Four: ‘Bistro’ print cotton day dress, 1947
1984.70.465 (Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection)
Canterbury Museum, Christchurch, New Zealand.
Image Fifty-Five: Day dress of floral patterned polished cotton, 1956
EC184.219 (Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection
Canterbury Museum, Christchurch, New Zealand.
Image Fifty-Six: Brocaded satin cocktail dress, 1958
1984.70.633 (Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection)
Canterbury Museum, Christchurch, New Zealand.
Image Fifty-Seven: Gisborne street, 1950. Two dressmakers and a relative. The young woman in the centre is wearing a taffeta dress. The fabric has a white background with black and multi-coloured patterns.
Image Fifty-Eight: Gisborne Agricultural and Pastoral Show, 1950. The dressmaker, in the centre, is wearing a floral linen dress; white with a pink, lemon and green pattern. She also made the dress of her friend on the right, in blue and white voile with a dark blue velvet ribbon trim.
Image Fifty-Nine: A 1955 brocade bridesmaid’s dress in cerise pink embossed on to a silver background.
Image Sixty: A 1949 wedding dress in white lace.
Image Sixty-One: A 1962 white wedding gown made from metres of white lace and tulle over satin. The dressmaker, standing to the right of the bride, is wearing a floral print dress.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

(People) love that our clothes are non-derivative. Our designers don’t follow trends - they in some instances create them, and they always choose their own path. New Zealand design is an amalgamation of individuality. It’s a mixture of being different and having to do clever things because we are limited in what we can source here. It’s about having a multi-cultural society, high standards of quality and believing we can produce clothing that is as good - or better than - what’s made elsewhere, and just going for it (Curin-Birch, quoting Anne Chappaz, 2003, pp.66-68).

The research questions that initially defined the parameters of this study were concerned with identifying the social and economic environment that led dressmakers to set up in business during the period from the 1940s to the 1980s. The research proposed to determine how their businesses operated, what motivated clients to utilise their services, and how the dressmakers acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to practice. The competition that dressmakers faced from retail and wholesale apparel organisations was evaluated, as was the competition that the dressmakers presented to those sellers and producers. The status of dressmakers in the production of clothing, and their contribution to the furtherance of the New Zealand fashion industry was determined. The current status of the fashion industry was investigated and, linked to that, conclusions drawn about the continuation of the tradition of dressmaking in today’s world.

This thesis has drawn heavily on the primary information obtained from interviews with eighteen dressmakers. Their stories have considerable value in the record of the history and practice of dressmaking in New Zealand. It was important to the researcher to be able to include so much of the primary information as direct quotations of the dressmakers’ own words, because their recollections form such a valuable insight into the practices of a particular period which will never be experienced again in the same way. Their experiences
have been included in all chapters that focussed directly on the timeframe under consideration, but were particularly significant in chapters five to eight.

Chapter One introduced the study and provided a definition of a dressmaker, in the context of this study. It included the researcher’s personal motivation for pursuing the investigation and established the research questions and time-scale of the study. It also outlined the structure to be adopted for the research.

Chapter Two identified the literature that had relevance to the study. This chapter discussed the lack of New Zealand texts pertaining to dressmaking and, indeed the lack of writing about the lives and work of New Zealand women generally, until the 1980s. Literature that provided an international context and comparison was included and referred to. The methodologies utilised by the researcher to source and document new information, predominantly the stories of the interviewed dressmakers, were recorded and evaluated. The chapter concluded with the conviction on the part of the researcher that there were no published studies about the contribution of New Zealand dressmakers, particularly in the 1940s to 1980s time frame, and established this study as new research and formerly undocumented knowledge in this field.

Establishing the historical context that allowed the practice of dressmaking to develop and flourish in New Zealand was the main focus of Chapter Three. It presented an overview of the motivation behind European settlement of New Zealand in the mid to late nineteenth century and confirmed that needlewomen, including dressmakers, were important to the development of the new colony. The vast majority of New Zealand’s colonial settlers came from Great Britain, either directly or via Australia, therefore the social and economic
environment that led them to leave Britain was covered in some detail. The practice of
dressmaking in nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, Australia and, to a lesser
extent, the United States of America, was compared to the practice in New Zealand. Factors
unique to New Zealand in regard to the isolation of the settlement and the relationship
between the colonists and indigenous Maori, were discussed.

Chapter Four placed an emphasis on the history of sewing in New Zealand. It clearly
demonstrated that sewing assumed a significant place in the lives of New Zealand women
since the arrival of the first missionary families in 1814. The mission wives appear to have
been adept needlewomen who extended their responsibilities to teaching sewing skills to the
local Maori women and girls. Reference was made to the categories of clothing makers that
were apparent in nineteenth century New Zealand, including dressmakers, seamstresses and
tailoresses. Census figures, recording the number of women who identified as dressmakers,
were consulted for the period covering the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
Industrialisation of the clothing industry had an impact on the numbers of women working in
this trade, as an increasing number went to work in the clothing factories, but this did not
cause a decline in the number of dressmakers. In fact, census figures showed an increase in
dressmakers between 1881 and 1911 as demand for their services grew due, no doubt, to a
rapidly increasing population. The continuing complexity of women’s fashion, requiring a
close body fit achieved through individual fittings, was also a factor in ensuring work for
dressmakers.

The progress of the dressmaking trade in the twentieth century was examined in Chapter Five.
It revealed that the numbers of women in employment generally were steadily increasing. In
1874 only eleven point one per cent of women were in paid employment; by 1921 women
made up twenty point seven per cent of the workforce. Paid employment was the domain of unmarried women because it was not considered suitable for married women to work outside the home. In 1926 only three point five per cent of married women were in paid employment. It can be assumed that dressmakers, in particular, represented a significant proportion of this number, given that dressmaking could be fitted in around responsibilities to the family.

The competition that the dressmakers faced from opportunities for their clients to buy from other sources, such as retail stores and by mail order, was also considered in Chapter Five. Reference was made to some of the major department stores that maintained substantial dressmaking departments during the period of the study. Resources that dressmakers required were identified and an evaluation made of their availability during this period. Evidence drawn from the dressmakers’ accounts and from secondary sources suggests that dressmaking fabrics were readily available and were generally purchased by the clients at fabric retail shops, and supplied to the dressmakers. Haberdashery, sewing machines, dress patterns, and other dressmaking equipment and supplies were also easily purchased in local drapery stores, department stores, or sewing machine shops. Women were able to enjoy articles about fashion in a wide selection of women’s magazines.

Most New Zealand women had the opportunity to learn sewing skills at school, and dressmaking apprenticeships were available to those who wanted to utilise these skills in employment. Women could also enrol in dressmaking and pattern making courses at private dressmaking colleges, state technical colleges, or through correspondence programmes. Several of the participating dressmakers had experienced education and training in these environments. It was considered usual and desirable for all women to have some sewing skills and a strong infrastructure existed to support them in acquiring this expertise. Research
revealed that no evidence could be found of employment or mentoring organisations that would have benefited the dressmakers.

World War Two, which lasted from 1939 to 1945, represented a major disruption to the lives and work of all New Zealanders. For the country’s women, wartime demands saw them managing farms and businesses, working voluntarily or by direction in employment that was unfamiliar to them, and adjusting to shortages in the supply of many foodstuffs and products. Chapter Six documented the effects of living within the constraints of war, including the impact on the production of clothing and the employment of women in the clothing industry during this period. The interviewed dressmakers’ recollections of the effects of the war on their lives and work were included.

Chapter Seven concentrated on presenting primary research evidence resulting from the recollections of the interviewed dressmakers. Responses to questions about their personal lives revealed that many came from families that had some tradition of working with clothing. Their dressmaking skills were acquired in a variety of ways and most worked in a commercial garment-making organisation before setting up in business themselves. In her study of items in the Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection, Judson made a distinction between dressmaker-trained and self-taught practitioners (see 8.2). Eighty per cent of the focus group in this study acquired their dressmaking skills in a professional context, either in formal apprenticeships or by working as trainees under experienced dressmakers. The majority operated their businesses in their own homes and fitted the sewing in around children’s school hours and family life. Many of the dressmakers worked at night as a result of these domestic demands.
A relatively small number of dressmakers were interviewed but, those selected worked in a wide range of localities and over a broad span of years. Although the selection covered a divergent range of ages and lengths of career, the research revealed a remarkable similarity of responses. This would suggest that a larger focus group would have led to similar results, and that the selected group was representative of their kind.

Clients generally supplied the dressmakers with fabric, and an indication of the garment design, if not a pattern or picture. However, the dressmakers were prepared to advise on the suitability of the fabric to the design and the suitability of the design to the client’s body shape. While the dressmakers made a wide variety of clothing, and other textile items, they appear to have been most prolific in the making of wedding garments, evening gowns, tailored costumes, and clothing for demanding figure types, such as the overweight or elderly. These women created for themselves both a business and an outlet for their own creativity. Dressmaking was an opportunity to showcase their skills and their pride in their work and their concern for quality was very apparent; for example, it was common practice for many of them to ensure that they went to the church in order to see the bridal gowns that they had made, on the bride and her attendants.

Investigation into the status of the post-war New Zealand fashion industry was documented in Chapter Eight. The foremost producers and influencers of fashion were identified, and the importance of competitions and awards was discussed. The chapter included discourse around the adoption of the title “designer” and the differentiation of “designer” from “dressmaker”. Section 8.2 drew some conclusions about the contribution that dressmakers made to post-war New Zealand fashion. The chapter concluded with a synopsis of the status
of the New Zealand fashion industry today and identified elements of continuity between past practice and current successes.

The motivation to pursue this research originated from a desire to evaluate the significance of the dressmaker to the furtherance of fashion, and was concerned with the dressmaker as a woman who made clothes to the order of, and to fit the measurements of, individual clients (see definition, section 1.1.1). The interviewed dressmakers all undoubtedly met this criterion. The lack of relevant literature led to the conclusion that primary evidence did not exist and was best obtained from accounts of dressmakers practising during the period. There was very little in the literature that referred specifically to dressmaking in New Zealand, particularly in regard to the 1940s to 1980s timeframe.

The practice of dressmaking in New Zealand was continuous from the period of the first European settlement in the early nineteenth century. The progress of this British colony throughout the nineteenth century led to a number of women setting up in business as dressmakers or working in this occupation in drapery or department stores. Dressmaking was second only to domestic service as the most popular employment for women in nineteenth century New Zealand. Dressmakers worked from their homes, in independent business establishments, as itinerant practitioners travelling between the homes of their clients, or in the workrooms of drapery and department stores. From the 1880s onwards, mechanisation of production led to many women entering employment in clothing factories. According to the 1911 census, of a total of nineteen thousand, two hundred and seventy-five women employed in the making of clothing, seventeen thousand, three hundred and twenty-two were dressmakers. By 1921, dressmakers numbered six thousand, eight hundred and sixty-eight of a total of thirteen thousand, eight hundred and forty-one women working in clothing
manufacturing. As the twentieth century progressed, census figures indicate that the number of women pursuing a career in dressmaking was in decline.

A strong emphasis on the home and family existed in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century. New Zealand was becoming increasingly more urbanised and, by 1926, two-thirds of New Zealanders lived in urban areas. In contrast to the earlier periods of colonisation, men now went to workplaces away from the home and married women, in particular, shouldered the responsibility for managing the household. The workplace became the domain of men and of young, unmarried women. Changes in social expectations and independence gained through employment brought greater social freedoms for young women, with opportunities to attend dances, the cinema, picnics, and sporting events. The occupation of dressmaking faced competition from the attractions of working in offices, factories, and retail stores.

Married women assumed more and more responsibility for procuring items for the home, such as food, clothing and furnishings, and increasingly became spenders rather than earners. Although, as Phillips (1987, p.222) reported, “the relatively high cost of manufactured goods in New Zealand meant that the household never lost its productive function to the extent that it did among the middle classes of other urbanising societies.” Dating from the earliest period of colonisation, New Zealand had always exhibited elements of uniqueness: the considerable remoteness from other centres of population; the relatively cordial relationships with the indigenous people; the sense of resourcefulness of the people; and the lack of a rigid class structure that allowed opportunities for the betterment of a person’s social status.
Up to and including the 1930s, more than ninety-five per cent of New Zealand’s immigrants had come from the British Isles. All but one of the dressmakers who form the focus of this study, were born in New Zealand. Two were born in 1907; three were born pre-1920; three just post-1920; six in 1930 or 1931; and four during World War Two. Over ninety per cent of this group were employed as dressmakers by 1960. They had strong recollections of the privations of war and were familiar with the need to be resourceful and to “Make Do and Mend.” Craft skills were passed from generation to generation and many women could sew and knit. Family members were role models and first teachers in the making of clothing for over two thirds of the dressmakers. A number of the dressmakers continued the tradition by passing on craft skills to the young women in their families. This continuity of handing down the craft is also apparent in fostering early interests in fashion and garment making amongst many of New Zealand’s current group of successful fashion designers.

During the post-war period, New Zealand experienced sustained economic growth and prosperity. All of the dressmakers married and had children, and it appears that their incomes were not essential to the maintenance of family life. The exception was two dressmakers who were widowed and had to support their families, and one woman whose husband was in a poorly paid job for a period of time. The husbands of the dressmakers were generally very supportive of the sewing, perhaps because the work did not seriously challenge the husbands’ provider role, and because the women regarded the welfare of the family as a priority. The work was fitted around family life, often when the children were at school or in bed at night.

The most common reasons given for setting up in business at home included the desire to have some extra income, the opportunity to utilise their expertise, and because someone had asked them to make them some clothing. It was obvious that the dressmakers enjoyed the
creative process and were proud of their ability to craft quality garments. Evidence of the pleasure that they gained from the work can be assumed from the long hours that they devoted to sewing, particularly when the income was not necessarily essential.

In addition to being introduced to sewing skills by family, the dressmakers learned dressmaking as part of their education. The school leaving age for most of the group was fifteen to sixteen years, although two left at thirteen and one went on to achieve a Homecraft Teachers’ Certificate. Young women were generally not encouraged to pursue higher qualifications or a career in the professions, and work was often seen as merely a bridge between school and marriage. Six of the dressmakers completed three to four year dressmaking apprenticeships after leaving school and eight went to work for established dressmakers or in small workrooms. Of the remaining three, two pursued other careers before entering dressmaking and one went straight into her own business. The majority of their businesses were home-based and none of the practitioners sought professional advice before setting up. In any event, it is not likely that they would have found any. While there were dressmaking courses on offer at private colleges, technical colleges, and by correspondence, there were no equivalent courses for women interested in developing small businesses.

The dressmakers who form the focus of this study did not advertise for clients but reported that they usually had more than enough work. Referrals by existing clients appeared to be the most common method of gaining new clients. Their businesses continued to grow throughout the 1960s and 1970s, even though the New Zealand fashion industry had developed to an extent that many other avenues for acquiring garments existed. The consistency of information gained from the focus group would suggest that their experiences were fairly typical of all dressmakers during this period.
The number of dressmakers officially recorded in census figures in the mid-1960s had declined to just over twelve hundred but, the number of women employed in the production of clothing generally, had increased to approximately thirty-six thousand. Post-war economic prosperity and population growth guaranteed that markets existed to consume the outputs of the clothing producers, including high fashion; ready-to-wear and department store lines; and fashion aimed solely at the burgeoning youth market. Tariffs and licensing controls imposed on imported clothing priced them beyond the budgets of most consumers and created a preference for locally made garments. Dressmakers were able to retain their clients in this environment by remaining competitive in price and by catering to their niche market. By the end of the period of the study, in the 1980s, there were indications that the dressmakers’ market had evolved to meet the demand predominantly for special occasions, and garments for figure types not widely catered for elsewhere. At the time of interviewing, during the years 1999 to 2003, many of the dressmakers were still working, continuing careers that spanned several decades.

At the conclusion of the study, the researcher was left in no doubt that dressmakers had made a significant contribution to the fashionability of New Zealand women during the 1940s to the 1980s, and that the dressmakers’ experiences and practices were worthy of recording as contributors to the history of New Zealand fashion. Their practice evolved from being virtually the exclusive producers of women’s fashion in nineteenth century New Zealand to that of valued suppliers to a niche market by the late twentieth century. The information provided by the dressmakers, and the conclusions drawn from the representative nature of the Mollie Rodie Mackenzie Collection, indicate that dressmakers were highly productive during the period of the study from the 1940s to the 1980s. The total number of garments that they
produced may not have been commercially significant, and their designs may not always have been innovative or original, but their contribution to meeting the needs of their clients was significant. The successes of dressmakers in the various fashion design awards and competitions, demonstrate that many did have the ability to design creatively and with originality. To reiterate, dressmakers enabled many women to dress fashionably or, at the very least, with style.

So, would it have been possible to develop a fashion manufacturing industry in New Zealand without this history of capable dressmakers using and passing on their skills? We really have no way of knowing for certain. However, there is no doubt that, at the time that the industry was poised for development, there was an extensive store of experience and skills to draw on. There was also an acceptance of the practice of following fashion that had been fostered to a large extent by the ability of dressmakers to create and interpret fashion.

The most significant contribution of the dressmakers is arguably the legacy that they have left to future generations. The success and unique quality of current New Zealand designer labels owes a great deal to the strong traditional skills base and the focus on technical expertise that could be construed to have continued for a longer period in New Zealand than in other western cultures, such as Great Britain and North America. New Zealand’s relative isolation, a history of protectionism, and a culture of producing apparel locally in small numbers to meet a small market, have all ensured a continuation of semi-couture production methods. The New Zealand philosophy of finding and applying its own solutions has its origins, in the fashion industry, in the traditions established by the dressmakers.
This investigation into the contribution of the dressmaker to the progression of fashion in New Zealand is but one part of a potentially larger story. This research into an area of predominantly feminine textile crafts appears to reflect the current zeitgeist in New Zealand.\(^i\) The success of Heather Nicholoson’s book *The Loving Stitch*, about the history of knitting in New Zealand, is an indication of this interest. It was the winner of the Montana Medal for Non-Fiction in the 1999 Montana New Zealand Book Awards. Respected New Zealand journalist Rosemary McLeod’s book on textile crafts, published in April 2005, generated considerable media interest on its release. The book, entitled *Thrift to Fantasy, Home Textile Crafts of the 1930s to the 1950s*, documents in text and images, such seemingly commonplace articles as tea-cosies and aprons. In a radio interview, McLeod suggested that the book provided “an interesting record of our social history” (*Radio Pacific*, 2 April 2005). There is a perception that textile crafts are starting to be accorded a measure of credibility and value, and that this thesis about the practice of dressmaking and its place in New Zealand’s social history is timely.

Further research could consider the role of men in the establishment of a fashion industry. New Zealand has produced some influential male fashion designers and manufacturers, whose stories are largely undocumented. The backgrounds and professional activities of tailors could be further investigated, particularly in regard to individual histories of some of the renowned characters in the trade. Little has been written about the establishment and operation of the dressmaking departments in the major department stores; an area that the researcher developed a fascination for, following an interview with one of the dressmakers who had worked for the Ballyntyne family in Christchurch. A comparison of the design practices and achievements of New Zealand designers of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, with those of current designers, could be fruitful. It appears that both groups were relatively successful
but in completely different social and economic environments. Finally, an opportunity exists to examine the position of Maori women in regard to the adoption of European dress in colonial times; to their adherence to the dictates of fashion throughout the progression of the twentieth century; and to their preferred methods of acquiring their wardrobes. Were there any renowned designers or dressmakers in Maoridom? Did their work reflect elements of their culture? Did Maori women make their own clothes, or patronise Pakeha dressmakers?

As with most research, the process of enquiry and discovery generates further questions.

While delving into the literature related to this study, a novel entitled *The Dressmaker* was uncovered. The author, Rosalie Ham, tells the story of the return of Tilly, a European-trained dressmaker, to her small hometown in Australia in the 1950s. Tilly’s story could have been set in any small Australian or New Zealand town in this era; so resonant is it of the fashions and social attitudes of the time. Tilly exerts a major influence on the women in the town as she flatters them with beautifully-crafted and perfectly-fitting garments. Her skills extend to designing and making sixteenth century costumes for a Shakespearian play enacted by the local drama club, and to inspiring the local constable to reveal his skills as a seamstress so that he becomes her willing assistant. Ham presents a beautifully evocative description of a dressmaker and it is quoted here to conclude this body of work, as a gesture of respect for the craftswomen identified during this research.

Tilly looked down at the dull buildings and the slow, brown creek. The roof of the silo shimmered under the sun and dust whipped along the dry, dirt track to the oval. The trees leaned with the hot wind. She went inside. She stood in front of her tailor’s mirror and studied her reflection. She was wreathed in a brilliant halo, like a back-lit actor, dust from tailor’s chalk and flock floating in shafts of light about her. The skeletal backdrop was cluttered with the stuff of mending and dressmaking – scraps and off-cuts, remnants of fashion statements that spanned from the sixteenth century onwards. Stacked to the roof, shoved into every orifice in the small tumbling house were bags and bags of material bits spewing ribbon ends, frayed threads and fluff. Cloth spilled from dark corners and beneath chairs and clouds of wool lay about, jumbled with satin corners. Striped rags, velvet off-cuts, strips of velour, lamé, checks, spots, paisley and school uniform mixed with feather boas and sequin-spattered cotton, shearer’s (sic) singlets and bridal lace. Coloured bolts stood propped against window sills and balanced across the armchair. Bits of drafted pattern and drawings – svelte designs for women who believed themselves to be size ten – were secured to dusty curtains with pins and clothes pegs. There were pictures torn from magazines and costume designs scribbled on butchers’ paper dumped in clumps on the floor, along with piles of frail battered patterns. Tape measures dripped from nails on studs and the necks of naked mannequin.
dummies, while scissors stood in empty Milo tins beside old jars brimming with buttons and press studs, like smarties at a party. Zippers tumbled from a brown paper sack and snaked over the floor and onto the hearth. Her sewing machine waited erect on its housing table (Ham, 2000, pp. 286-287).

NOTES

There are indications that there is a resurgence in pursuit of domestic textile crafts internationally. The popularity of hand knitting amongst young American women is an example of this. (See Parkins, W. (December 2004) Celebrity Knitting and the Temporality of Postmodernity. *Fashion Theory* v.8 no.4 pp.425-41.)
Image Sixty: A dressmaker in her own wedding gown. White lace over satin. 1951.
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**FILM, TELEVISION AND RADIO**


**ELECTRONIC SOURCES**


UNPUBLISHED THESIS


STATUTES, CENSUS, AND GOVERNMENT STATISTICS


EXHIBITIONS


CONFERENCES


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TWENTY-EIGHTH ANNUAL MEETING AND NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM. (5-8 June 2002) Chicago, Costume Society of America.
Emigrants leaving the United Kingdom, bound for New Zealand, were advised in the *Handbook For Intending Emigrants To The Southern Settlements of New Zealand*, to take the following:

The following outfit for a labouring man and his wife, is the least which, under any circumstances, should be procured. It of course does not include those articles of clothing which may already be in their possession:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO. 1.</th>
<th>NO. 11.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FOR THE HUSBAND</strong></td>
<td><strong>FOR THE WIFE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 coloured Shirts</td>
<td>18 Calico Chemises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Guernsey Shirts</td>
<td>6 Petticoats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 pairs Worsted Stockings</td>
<td>3 Flannel Petticoats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 pairs Cotton Socks</td>
<td>4 Flannel Waistcoats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 pair strong Fustian Trousers</td>
<td>12 pairs Cotton Stockings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 pair strong Canvas do.</td>
<td>2 pairs Shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Fustian Jacket and Waistcoat</td>
<td>2 Flannel Petticoats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Pea Jacket</td>
<td>18 pairs Cotton Stockings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth Coat, Waistcoat, and Trousers</td>
<td>2 pairs Shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth Cap</td>
<td>2 fustian Jackets and Waistcoats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flock Mattress, Bolster, and Pillow</td>
<td>Pea Coat and Trousers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 pairs Cotton Sheets………..</td>
<td>South-wester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cloth Cap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 pairs strong Shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 pairs light do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suit of Cloth Clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bedding, &amp;c., as before</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Opportunities will occur on the voyage of catching rain water as it runs from the sails, the emigrant’s wife should always take advantage of this, as it will add materially to her own comfort and that of her husband, to wash as much as possible of a limited outfit.

The following list is on a more extended scale, and whenever the means of the labouring emigrant will command it, no article, at any rate of his wife’s outfit, should be omitted:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO. 1V.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HUSBAND.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 coloured Shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Guernsey Shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 pairs Worsted Stockings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Cotton Socks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 pair strong Fustian Trousers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 pairs strong Canvas do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 fustian Jackets and Waistcoats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pea Coat and Trousers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-wester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth Cap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 pairs strong Shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 pairs light do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suit of Cloth Clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedding, &amp;c., as before</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We will now give two very full outfits, the one for a gentleman and the other for a lady.

**NO. V1**

**OUTFIT FOR A GENTLEMAN**

- 72 Calico shirts, with Dress Fronts
- 18 fine Flannel Waistcoats
- 6 moderately warm Flannel Waistcoats
- 60 pairs of Fine Cotton Socks
- 12 pairs of Worsted or Angola Socks
- 24 pairs of Calico Drawers
- 24 pairs of Flannel do.
- 60 Towels
- 36 Pocket Handkerchiefs
- 24 fine Cambric Pocket Handkerchiefs
- 4 black Silk Cravats
- 4 coloured Silk Cravats
- 12 coloured Muslin Cravats
- 12 pair of fine white Cotton or Thread Gloves
- 12 pair of dress Kid Gloves
- 4 pair of coloured Kid Gloves
- 4 pair of Braces, white cotton
- 18 thin Cotton Night Caps
- 12 yards fine Welsh flannel
- 1 Clothes-bag
- 2 Pair of Bathing Drawers
- 1 light Cotton Dressing Gown
- 1 warm Flannel Dressing Gown, made large or loose
- 12 pair of Sheets, made rather large
- 12 Pillow Cases
- 3 Blankets
- 2 Counterpanes
- 1 Straw Hat
- 1 Cloth Cap
- 1 Good Beaver Hat
- 1 India Cloth or Camlet Jacket
- 1 India Cloth or Camlet Trousers
- 2 brown Holland Blouses
- 12 pair of Cotton Trousers
- 6 pair of fine Linen Trousers
- 18 thin white Jackets
- 18 white Waistcoats
- 2 pairs of Flannel do.
- 60 pairs of Fine Cotton Socks
- 12 pairs of Worsted or Angola Socks
- 24 pairs of Calico Drawers
- 24 pairs of Flannel do.
- 60 Towels
- 36 Pocket Handkerchiefs
- 24 fine Cambric Pocket Handkerchiefs
- 4 black Silk Cravats
- 4 coloured Silk Cravats
- 12 coloured Muslin Cravats
- 12 pair of fine white Cotton or Thread Gloves
- 12 pair of dress Kid Gloves
- 4 pair of coloured Kid Gloves
- 4 pair of Braces, white cotton
- 18 thin Cotton Night Caps
- 12 yards fine Welsh flannel
- 1 Clothes-bag
- 2 Pair of Bathing Drawers
- 1 light Cotton Dressing Gown
- 1 warm Flannel Dressing Gown, made large or loose
- 12 pair of Sheets, made rather large
- 12 Pillow Cases
- 3 Blankets
- 2 Counterpanes
- 1 Straw Hat
- 1 Cloth Cap
- 1 Good Beaver Hat
- 1 India Cloth or Camlet Jacket
- 1 India Cloth or Camlet Trousers
- 2 brown Holland Blouses
- 12 pair of Cotton Trousers
- 6 pair of fine Linen Trousers
- 18 thin white Jackets
- 18 white Waistcoats

**NO. V11.**

**OUTFIT FOR A LADY.**

- 48 Calico or Cambric Chemises
- 36 Calico Night Dresses
- 36 Night Caps
- 24 Cambric Slips
- 24 Calico Middle Petticoats
- 3 Flannel Petticoats
- 1 Horse-hair Petticoat
- 24 Fine Flannel Waistcoats
- 24 pair of Cambric Trousers
- 48 Pocket Handkerchiefs
- 48 Huckaback Hand Towels

- 1 Suit of Evening Dress Clothes
- 1 Suit for Morning Wear
- 1 Pilot-Cloth Coat
- 1 pair of Pilot-Cloth Trousers
- 1 South-wester, or foul weather Cap
- 2 or 3 strong Bullock Trunks
- 1 Dressing Case
- 6 Tooth Brushes
- 2 Nail Brushes
- 2 Hair Brushes
- 2 Combs
- 4 Boxes Tooth Powder
- 4 lbs. Windsor Soap
- 2 lbs. Marine Soap
- 1 Sponge and Bag
- Oil or Pomade for the Hair
- Perfumery
- 1 Work-Bag containing Tapes, Buttons, Needles, Cottons, &c.
- 1 piece of Shoe Ribbon
- Brushes, Blacking, and Boot-jack, in case
- 1 Leather Writing Case, with an assortment of Stationery, and a good knife
- 2 pairs of dress Boots
- 2 pairs of strong Walking Boots
- 2 pairs of dress Shoes
- 2 pairs of strong Walking Shoes, all made of full size
- 1 Couch with Drawers
- 1 Wash-hand Stand to form a Table, Metal Basin
- 1 Chair
- 1 Looking Glass, with Slide and Fittings to form a Toilet Glass
- 1 Cabin Lamp and 12 lbs of Candles
- 1 Foot Bath
- 1 Water Can
- Floor Cloth, Matting or Carpet, for Cabin

- 1 Work-Box
- 12 pairs of white Kid Gloves
- 19 pairs of coloured Gloves
- Long white Kid Gloves
- 24 pairs of Thread or Silk Gloves
- 12 pairs of Thread or Lace Gloves
- 12 pairs of Lace Mittins
- Long Lace Mittins
- 1 Clothes Bag
- 12 Dusters
- 8 pairs of Calico Sheets
12 Bathing Towels
24 pairs of fine Cotton Stockings
24 Pairs of Thread Stockings
12 pairs of white Silk Hose
2 pairs of black Silk Hose
1 coloured or white Flannel Dressing – Gown, warm
2 coloured Dressing Gowns
8 white Muslin do.
4 coloured Morning Dresses
8 Muslin Dresses
4 Dinner Dresses
2 Silk Dresses, and 1 Satin Dress is also desirable
2 Muslin-de-laine or Chalie Dresses
3 pairs of Stays
1 Cloak
8 pairs of Shoes
2 Bonnets
Shawl
Fancy Handkerchiefs
Fancy Aprons
Capes, Collars, &c.
Ribbons, Gauzes, &c.
Haberdashery, Needles, &c.

8 Pillow Cases
3 Blankets
2 Counterpanes
20 or 30 yards of fine Flannel
6 Tooth Brushes
3 Nail Brushes
4 Hair Brushes
Combs
6 boxes of Tooth Powder
4 lbs. of brown Windsor Soap
4 lbs. of Violet Powder
1 good Sponge
Pomades or Oil for the Hair
Eau de Cologne
Dressing Case
Writing Case, Paper, &c.
Books
1 Ship Couch, with Drawers
1 Wash-hand Stand
1 Light Cane Chair
1 Looking-glass
1 Cabin Lamp, and 6 lbs. of Candles
1 Foot Bath and Tin Can
1 Brush, Dust-pan, &c.
China and Glass

(Earp, 1849, quoted in Drummond, 1967, pp.27-31)
APPENDIX TWO: BIOGRAPHIES OF DRESSMAKERS

The dressmakers interviewed for this study are listed in chronological order of interview. The dressmakers are identified by only the initials of their first and last names. The researcher retains their full names and full transcriptions of the interviews in a secure file. Full names are not included in this dissertation to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

November, 1999 - Interviewee identified as “DS”:
Born in New Zealand in 1918. Married with four children. Practised dressmaking in Wellington and Palmerston North (both lower North Island), from 1933 to 1998.

February, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “MH”:
Born in New Zealand in 1931. Married with one child. Practised dressmaking in Gisborne (mid-North Island), from 1946 to 1969.

March, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “AM”:
Born in England in 1941. Moved to New Zealand in 1963. Married with two children. Practised dressmaking in Wellington (lower North Island), and Auckland (upper North Island), from 1970 to the present day.

March, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “PC”:

June, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “DL”: (Interview by Mail)

June, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “JM”:
Born in New Zealand in 1915. Married with four children. Practised dressmaking in Levin and Lower Hutt (both lower North Island), from 1932 to 1941, and from 1960 to 1965.

July, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “ZP”: (Interview by Mail)

July, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “VD”:

Born in New Zealand in 1929. Married with three children. Practised dressmaking in Auckland (upper North Island), from 1943 to the present day.

July, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “MP”: (Interview by Mail)

Born in New Zealand in 1930. Married with two children. Practised dressmaking in Wanganui, (mid-North Island), from 1945 to an unspecified date.

September, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “ML”:


October, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “MF”:

Born in New Zealand in 1907. Married with three children. Practised dressmaking in Timaru and Christchurch (both in the South Island), and Palmerston North (lower North Island), from 1926 to 1967.

October, 2000 - Interviewee identified as “JA”:

Born in New Zealand in 1944. Married with two children. Practised dressmaking in Wanganui (mid-North Island), from 1960 to the present day.

June, 2001 - Interviewee identified as “ED”:

Born in New Zealand in 1907. Married with one child. Practised dressmaking in Auckland (upper North Island), from 1922 to 1995.

July, 2001 - Interviewee identified as “CM”:

Born in New Zealand in 1930. Married with six children. Practised dressmaking in Auckland (upper North Island), and Te Awamutu (mid-North Island), from 1943 to 1964.

March, 2002 - Interviewee identified as “IG”:
Born in New Zealand in 1920. Married with seven children. Practised dressmaking in Hamilton, Morrinsville, and Auckland (all upper North Island), from 1934 to the present day.

April, 2003 - Interviewee identified as “PF”:

Born in New Zealand in 1931. Married with five children. Practised dressmaking in Auckland and North Auckland (upper North Island), and Te Kuiti (mid-North Island), from 1964 to the present day.

May, 2003 - Interviewee identified as “DB”:

Born in New Zealand in 1918. Married with two children. Practised dressmaking in Christchurch (mid-South Island), from 1933 to the 1980s.

May, 2003 - Interviewee identified as “JSM”:

Born in New Zealand in approximately 1947. Married with three children. Practised dressmaking in Christchurch (mid-South Island), from 1962 to the present day.
APPENDIX THREE: ANALYSIS OF DRESSMAKERS’ RESPONSES

Responses to the questions put to dressmakers were descriptive, therefore qualitative analysis has yielded the most useful information. However, certain elements of the responses can be analysed in a quantitative manner:

1. Were you born in New Zealand?
   
   Yes: 17
   No: 1

2. If not, where were you born?
   
   England (one respondent)

3. What year did you come to New Zealand?
   
   1963 (one respondent)

4. How old were you then?
   
   22 (one respondent)

5. Was there a family tradition of dressmaking?
   
   Yes (mother): 12
   Yes (other family member): 2
   No: 4

6. Why did you choose to work at home?
   
   Because I was married with children: 10
   Because I loved sewing: 3
   For extra income: 2
   To have independence: 1
   It evolved from sewing for friends: 1
   It was the decision of my guardian: 1

7. Which year did you start dressmaking and when did you give it up?
   
   1922 - 1995
   1926 - 1967
   1932 - 1941
   1933 - 1980s
   1933 - 1998
   1934 - still dressmaking
   1937 - 1991
   1943 - 1964
1943 - still dressmaking
1945 - unspecified
1946 - 1969
1946 - still dressmaking
1950 - 1974
1956 - 1976
1960 - 1974
1960 - still dressmaking
1962 - still dressmaking
1970 - still dressmaking

8. Why did you stop?

Failing eyesight - 3
Neck problems / Ill health - 2
Lost interest - 2
Changed occupation - 4
Married a policeman (and therefore not permitted to work) - 1
Because of children - 1
Still dressmaking - 5

9. What city or town were you based in?

Wellington - 2
Palmerston North - 2
Gisborne - 1
Auckland - 8
Elsthorpe - 1
Hastings - 1
Levin - 1
Lower Hutt - 1
Timaru - 1
Christchurch - 4
Wanganui - 2
Tauranga - 1
Te Awamutu - 1
Te Kuiti - 1
Hamilton - 1
Morrinsville - 1
North Auckland - 1
(The number of locations exceeds the number of dressmakers because several dressmakers
worked in more than one town.)

10. Were you married?

Yes - 18

11. What was your husband’s attitude to your work?

Very supportive - 3
Mildly supportive - 5
Unclear response - 10

12. Did you have any children?

Yes - 18

13. Did you have an area of the house set aside solely for your dressmaking activities?

Yes - 8
Used living areas - 9
No - 1

14. What equipment did you have and where did you get it from?

- Domestic machine, unspecified brand - 1
- Domestic machine, Singer - 11
- Domestic machine, Pfaff - 1
- Domestic machine, Bernina - 5
- Domestic machine, Elna - 1
- Industrial machine - 8
- Overlocker - 6
(The number of machines exceeds the number of dressmakers because several had more than one machine.)
Information about additional equipment and places of purchase was not quantifiable.

15. Did you use a dressmakers’ model or tailors’ dummy?

Yes - 3
No - 2
No response - 13

16. How did you develop your expertise?

17. Did you do any patternmaking, construction or textiles courses?

- Experience gained working in a dressmaking workroom - 2
- Sewing classes at school - 6
- Taught by a relative - 3
- Self-taught - 1
- Formal apprenticeship - 8
- Construction course - 2
- Patterndrafting course - 8
- Technical College course - 1
- Textiles course - 0
- Homecraft Teachers Certificate - 1
- New Zealand Trade Certificate in Clothing - 1
(The number of responses exceeds the number of dressmakers because several developed expertise from more than one option.)
18. Did you use commercial purchased patterns or make your own?
Made my own - 3
Used commercial patterns - 4
Used a mixture of both - 11

19. Why, in your opinion, did your clients come to you?
Because they were friends of mine - 1
They thought I was good at my job - 2
Good workmanship - 3
Charges were economical - 3
I catered for awkward figures - 1
Clients wanted something unique - 1
Referred by satisfied clients - 1
No-one else dressmaking in the area - 1
Unclear response - 5

20. How did you get your first clients?
First clients were friends - 5
Took over the clients of a retiring dressmaker - 1
First client was a neighbour - 2
First client was a relative - 2
Word-of-mouth referral - 4
Could not recall - 4

21. Did you ever advertise?
Yes - 0
No - 13
No, but fabric stores had my name for referrals - 2
Unclear response - 3

22. What was the age group of your clients?
“But about the same as me” (through life) - 2
All ages (excluding children) - 8
All ages (including children) - 4
20 years to 35 years - 1
25 years to 50 years - 2
Unclear response - 1

23. What was their socio-economic status, in your opinion?
“Ordinary” people - 8
Mixture of average income to high income - 5
Mostly business people, and farm and station owners - 1
Response unclear - 2

24. What type of garments did you predominantly make?
25. Did you make for occasions such as weddings, debutante balls, balls, etc?

All types of garments, including weddings and ballgowns - 15
Tailored suits and coats - 7
Menswear - 1
Entertainment / Performance costume - 1
Daywear - 2
Response unclear - 1
(The number of responses exceeds the number of dressmakers because several mentioned more than one category.)

26. Were you known for specialising in any area?

No, I made anything - 8
Yes, weddings - 3
Yes, wedding, evening, and “occasion” clothes - 1
Yes, tailoring - 2
Yes, daywear - 1
Yes, childrenswear - 1
Response unclear - 2

27. How were designs decided upon?

Client brought a picture from a magazine or newspaper - 4
Client brought a picture or idea and I sketched adaptations - 4
Client brought a pattern - 3
Client described an idea and I would sketch or visualise it - 5
Response unclear - 2

28. Were your clients fashion-conscious?

Yes - 5
No - 2
Yes, to a limited extent - 8
Yes, in the late teens to 30 year age group - 1
Response unclear - 1

29. Were they influenced at all by the well-known European designers, such as Dior?

Yes - 2
No - 5
Yes, to a limited extent - 3
No response - 8

30. Were you ever asked to make a direct copy of a designer original?
Yes - 8  
No - 6  
No response - 4

31. Did you subscribe to or stock any fashion magazines?

Yes - 4  
No - 6  
Occasionally - 4  
No response - 4

32. What textiles did you predominantly use?

Crepe - 6  
Taffeta - 2  
Linen - 4  
Cotton - 7  
Wool - 9  
Satin - 6  
Worsted - 1  
Brocade - 3  
Organza - 1  
Silk - 5  
Lace - 2  
Tulle - 2  
Mirror nylon - 1  
Voile - 1  
Astrakhan - 1  
Boucle - 1  
Chiffon - 1  
Barathea - 1  
Serge - 1  
Tweed - 2  
Gabardine - 1  
Corduroy - 1  
Poplin - 1  
Acrylic - 1  
Nylon - 3  
Rayon - 1  
Polyester - 2  
Jersey knit - 1

(The number of responses exceeds the number of dressmakers because several dressmakers responded with more than one textile.)

33. From where did you source those textiles?

Local retailers - 3
Clients brought their own - 14
Response unclear - 1

34. From where did you source your haberdashery?

Local retailers - 14
Wholesaler’s representative - 1
Response unclear - 3

35. How did you charge - hourly rate or per garment?

Hourly rate - 4
Per garment - 10
Per garment, with an hourly rate for beading and handwork - 3
Response unclear - 1

36. Did you have any difficulties in receiving payment?

Never - 8
Once - 8
Twice - 2

37. Did your clients regard your business as a professional business?

Yes - 9
Unsure/maybe - 5
Response unclear - 4

38. Did you get any professional advice on setting up a business?

No - 1
Yes - 1
(Very few dressmakers responded to this question with a direct answer. However, the impression conveyed was that none had received professional advice, other than attendance by one at a “Small Business Course”.)

39. Did you operate your business as a registered business, i.e. pay tax on earnings?

Yes - 8
No - 8
Response unclear - 2

40. Were your earnings essential to the household income?

Yes, absolutely essential - 4
Not essential, but welcome - 1
No - 2
No response - 11

41. How many hours per day, on average, did you devote to dressmaking?
4 hours (day) - 4
5 to 7 hours (day) - 2
6 to 7 hours (evening/night) - 2
8 hours (day) - 4
8 to 10 hours (evening/night) - 2
up to 15 hours - 4

42. Did you have any competition in your area from other dressmakers?

No, no-one - 10
No, there were others but no competition - 5
Don’t know - 1
No response - 2

43. What opportunities were there in your city or town for clients to buy retail?

Many opportunities - 13
Limited opportunities - 2
Response unclear - 3

44. In your opinion, why didn’t they?

Dressmaker was cheaper - 3
Client wanted something different - 9
Client had figure problems - 6

45. Are you aware of any mail order catalogues or mail order opportunities that were available at the time that you were in business?

No - 6
No; perhaps Farmers - 5
Yes - 3
No response - 4

46. Did you offer other services, such as dressing, accessorising, millinery, or shopping with the client?

Yes, shopping - 3
Yes, dressing - 3
Yes, accessories - 5
No - 7

47. Did you ever enter any dressmaking or design competitions?

Yes, Benson and Hedges Fashion Design Awards - 2
Yes, local competitions - 4
Yes, Bride of the Year competition - 1
No - 11
48. Were you ever involved in the teaching of dressmaking?

Yes, for many years - 3  
Yes, for a short period - 3  
No, except to daughters - 6  
No - 6

49. If so, over what period of time and to whom?

Teaching patterndrafting and dressmaking for 23 years to young and mature adults at technical colleges - 1  
Teaching at country schools for 5 to 6 years to 11 and 12 year old students - 1  
Teaching clothing for 2 years to secondary school students - 1  
Teaching a dressmaking nightclass for 3 to 4 years - 1  
Teaching a dressmaking nightclass for a short time - 1  
Teaching a millinery nightclass for 10 years - 1

50. Do you have any examples of your work, such as photographs or actual garments?

(Responses to this question were impossible to quantify. However, most dressmakers had no, or very few garments, in their possession. Most dressmakers had some photographs of their work. One dressmaker had photographs of all the wedding dresses she had made).
APPENDIX FOUR: A SELECTION OF THE DRESSMAKERS’ STORIES, IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Dressmaker identified as “CM”

I went to work for this lady who was a very close friend of my mother, who had no family and (she) and her husband used to work this very very successful factory … It was L. P. Birch Limited and she was a very hard boss … She used to stand at a long, long bench, the cutting bench, and she did all the cutting … Everything was perfection and, if she saw you talking to your neighbour, she would call out to you that you musn’t talk … We were allowed to sing and we used to sing and sew, and my son always wonders how (I knew) all those songs – because we used to sit at the machines and sing. When the new man, Mr Cleaver, took over, he was an entirely different person. He wasn’t of the old school. So things started to change, and the war had come to an end, so that meant that we didn’t do any more of the WAACs’ uniforms and we reverted back to civilian clothes. We still did coats but it was a much more relaxed workroom. They never ever put heating in the workroom. There was no heating whatsoever, and there used to be very little sun … There were about twelve machinists and we worked facing each other on a long bench … sitting there freezing in the winter, so cold because the building was all concrete. So, one day, I took the law into my own hands and said, “Mr Cleaver, I don’t think it’s fair”, I said, “that you’ve got no heating here. Please can’t we get something?” So he stopped all the machines, and the others (because we were so like mice) didn’t back me up or say anything or do anything. Someone might have said, “yes it’s so cold when we come in here.” We started work at eight o’clock, half an hour for lunch, and finished at quarter past four. He was very annoyed with me for speaking up, but perhaps when he went into his office he thought, well good on her, I don’t know. But anyway, that was it, and eventually he came along and … he had a sort of footwarmer put on to each treadle. So we did get something.

Dressmaker identified as “ED”

I can never forget one day (when I was an apprentice) … in those days, the men’s suits always used to have white sleeve linings, striped sleeve linings, and I was sewing in the sleeve lining and I pricked my finger and it was bleeding. (My supervisor) said, “Chew some cotton. Chew some cotton.” So I had a mouth full of cotton and chewed and chewed and chewed, and I kept looking and the blood wasn’t gone, and I thought, God what am I doing chewing? She said, “What are you doing? Has it gone?” And I said, “no it hasn’t.” And she said, “Well take it out of your mouth and dab it on the blood.” I thought I had to chew it and the blood would go. But I had to take it out and dab it on the blood!

Dressmaker identified as “IG”

A very interesting experience I had when I was working for Madame Snowden was when King George 5th died. I went out for lunch and (when I got) back to the workroom, I was told I had to make a black flag for the Hamilton Post Office, and thirty-six small flags to go out to all the rural post offices, and I had to have them done by three o’clock. So, I made that machine buzz. It was a treadle machine and the boss was there (worrying) but I got them done. It must have been about 1936.

Dressmaker identified as “PF”

When I (was due to give birth to) Lance (my son), I was making a hat for a girl for a ‘going away’ hat and I was sitting all night sewing it and, uh oh, here we go! And I hung in there until the last minute. Took the hat and scissors and everything in my bag, and took my suitcase and we went to the hospital. I got to the door and had Lance (there). They took him and I took the hat and bag and went straight to the ward and carried on sewing. The nurse on night duty took the hat home to the girl whose wedding it was. I thought, I’m not going to let her down. The hat was a tiny little one – lemon, and it had flowers all around it. She had a lovely dress with a lovely full skirt.

Laurie (my second husband) brought up his children and he had to sew his daughters’ clothes to make ends meet. His mother got him to learn it – he broke his leg and he was in bed for a long time so she
thought that was the best thing (for him) to do. You musn’t be idle with her! We (Laurie and I) have always done things together. There (were not many) places you can work here, so we took on a school caretaker, cleaning job. While we were doing that, we were sewing and knitting at night. He took on a knitting contract – we’ve got lots of knitting machines – and he did work for Caroline Sills. I was sewing for (clients) and I had to go to hospital and have a hysterectomy, and they said you can’t use the industrial machine for six weeks, so I got on the knitting machine and knitted. And I did some patterns for Zambesi, so it wasn’t so bad. I was writing the patterns and knitting the sample, and made the sample up for them … so I got through my six weeks like that. I didn’t like knitting very much for a job. I like knitting but not as outwork – it wasn’t very interesting … Then a man decided he’d open a sewing factory (locally), so he said when he got enough machines, would I go down there with him. And I thought, that would be nice, so I sewed eight hours there, and then went on to the school for three or four hours there, and then had to come home and sew and knit at night.

Dressmaker identified as “JM”

(When I was in business) we made very few underclothes. I think I remember making a few nightdresses or slips, as they were called. Never any trousseaux – I think there were specialists in those or you could buy them, I suppose, ready-made. Mostly it was just everything the customer wanted. I think I can remember a few (balls and debutantes) because, in those days, there was always a winter season of all these balls coming up, like the Hunt Ball. Levin was the centre of … quite a big area and I suppose they did have a lot of other balls and I remember a few of them. Because I never ever went to them – couldn’t afford to for one thing and I didn’t mix in that type of thing. But I know we did sew for a few of them and for the races. There was always a race meeting. And, of course, the people that we sewed for, some of them would go to the race meetings all dressed up but, you see, this Miss Williams, who had the other dressmaking institution, she would be the one to sew for that, for the people who wanted to be noticed at any rate. And yet, I believe that quite a few of those women, you’d hear that they had gone to Sydney for their race meeting clothes, which was a bit snobbish.

Dressmaker identified as “DB”

I started (at Ballyntynes) when I was fifteen, third of October, 1933. When I first started … I’ve always worked for the children’s department … and there was just a big table and we made children’s things, but mostly for Rangiruru and Saint Margarets and Selwyn House. They’re the private secondary schools … They then took us … into the huge dressmaking room, a bit further round, and put a partition up … We had about eight machines and several tables. And then, we didn’t have any windows, we couldn’t see out or anything. We had a skylight that end and a skylight that end. You just pulled on a rope to hook it up. And that was it. And then we had … for the heating, it was one of those old-fashioned gas heaters and the place was freezing.

And then (the supervisor) branched out from just doing the school work. We went into the teenagers up to eighteen, and made ‘coming out’ dresses in those days, and their party dresses. Everything was made-to-measure. We didn’t make stock in those days … the girls that went to the secondary schools had their (debutante) frocks made, and then they gradually came back and wanted us to make a wedding frock for them.

(The Ballyntynes fire occurred in ) 1947, the day the Queen got married, eighteenth of November … fourteen girls in the workroom lost their lives; fourteen millinery girls. There (were) forty-two (who) lost their lives (in total). At quarter to three, I went out to change my clothes … because I always did the fittings and the measuring when the girls came in from secondary school at three o’clock. And I had to change my clothes and all, be in a proper black dress and dressed up. (The supervisors) came back (from a meeting) and they saw the smoke and they just came in and told the girls to get out … It was Edna Gardiner that came through to the toilets for me, in the cloakroom where we were, and she sang out, “Doris, you’ve got to come at once” … And the smoke was up to my knees and more by that time. We were lucky to get out … and they came back for me, because (the supervisors) just told them to drop everything and go. And, you see, the millinery girls couldn’t get out. Fourteen lost their lives. They went to the windows and the people in the street could see them waving their hankies.
Then, (after the fire), … we were at home for a fortnight and then they (sent) us down to the Kaiapoi (Woollen Mills). That was a rude awakening. We lost control (of the girls then) because that place closed at quarter to five. Machines, everything, was turned off; you couldn’t do an extra stitch … And there (were) radios going, they were singing, you could talk, but no, at Ballyntynes we weren’t allowed to do anything like that. And we lost control of the girls. They could see how others worked. It was a huge factory, the Kaiapoi was, and about quarter past four they’d start putting their work away and, by the time the bell went at quarter to five, they had their coats on, their gloves on, and they were waiting with their hands underneath the bench by their machines and, as soon as the bell went, the place was empty. We got locked in several times. The Kaiapoi Woollen Mills – they did coats and skirts and … they were a proper big clothing factory. They offered the floor space until (Ballyntynes) got going again … it was a different world altogether. Twelve months we were down there … You just had to catch the tram or bike to work, just the same. (Ballyntynes) didn’t worry. And then, I used to have to come … they had a warehouse in Lichfield Street where the women from the childrens’ showroom … they could come and buy still because (Ballyntynes) got in some things. And I used to have to run up and down Manchester Street, right from the railway, up to Lichfield Street to do the fittings or take measurements. So I got sore feet, so I dug my toes in early and they got a taxi for me each time. And, to this day, not a Ballyntyne has spoken to us – no counselling, no nothing. We were the workroom, we didn’t count.

The workroom made (my wedding dress) for me. And Betty – she was a naughty girl. Because, when you made wedding frocks, you always took a hair out of your hair for good luck, and sewed it into the seams of the frocks for good luck. And she was doing it, and she got a dirty mark on the front of my dress, right at the knee. So we made some little satin rose buds, like a little bouquet, and sewn them on the dress. And the bridesmaids – now, that was a Butterick pattern or whatever. To make it stand out, I bought green velveteen ribbon. And Mum dyed all the lace; because I had a big petticoat, full circle with a frill around the bottom, and Mum dyed all the lace with cold tea. Well you see, in our day, when we were kids, it was The Depression, starting in the twenties. Well, mum cut down our aunty’s clothes to fit us, and when I started High School, I had a pair of Aunty Queenie’s dyed shoes, pointed toe and a strap across the front … My dyed my Brownie uniform blue, I think (for Guides). I didn’t have the shoes and my Aunty came across with shoes and they were dyed. I had a skirt – well Aunty Queenie really lived with us – so I had a tan permanently pleated straight skirt and a knitted V-neck jumper in an apricot shade – I went to work the first day in borrowed clothes, and I didn’t think anything of it.

Dressmaker identified as “ML”

(When making wedding dresses) I used to have great arguments, particularly with the mother of the bride, because I would not complete the dress until three days before the wedding. You know and I know that people either put on weight or lose weight before weddings and, after a couple of experiences where I virtually had to remake a dress because (the bride) lost six pounds in the last week, I wouldn’t finish it. The mother of the bride would be panicking and jumping up and down. I was never late. This is something you might find interesting. In the Tauranga Primary School, I found this old treadle machine and, I think I had one experience where I got a big fright because the power went off as I was trying to finish something, so I got this old treadle, and a few times it saved my bacon when the power went off.

I did an apprenticeship with Alice Thomas in (the) Vulcan Buildings in Auckland, 1954, ’55 and ’56 … I have a lovely story of one of Alice’s wedding dresses on show a few years ago at Parnell (at an exhibition of wedding gowns in Parnell Cathedral). I found this broderie anglaise dress on show and knew that I had done all the oversewing of the seams, and the dainty belt. They were, of course, all behind barriers and I commented to one of the ladies on duty that I would have loved to have a look at the seams. She said, “How funny – this is my first day here, and it’s my dress so you may look.” What a wonderful nostalgic moment.

Dressmaker identified as “DL”

(Information supplied in writing following the interview). A few ‘blues’ I made – may be amusing.
My husband bought me a pair of electric scissors. I cut on the kitchen table with a heavy tapestry cloth that I used to pin slippery material to, to hold it in place. This day the cutting tool seemed to labour – no wonder. I’d cut out a complete sleeve from material and tablecloth!

I (had) just got my overlocker and was completing a brushed cotton blouse by overlocking round the armholes. When I’d finished I discovered I’d nicked a ¾ (inch) cut in the sleeve which caught up in the cutter. I had to flee into town and buy another ¾ yard of material (fortunate it was still in the shop) and unpick out the sleeve and sew in the new one.

One day I was finishing handsewing of a ‘linen’ suit and had to answer (the) phone so left the work on my working table in the sun. When I picked it up I noticed streaks on the skirt. Only in the front and not right through. As it was to be finished that day I set to and unpicked the skirt and turned the material. When it was finished I noticed as I pressed it (that) the fabric changed colour. It was a pale green and turned pinky mauve. I got out a scrap and experimented and came to the conclusion it was the sun that changed it. Overnight it all had gone. I did warn the client not to sit in the hot sun too long but never heard if it changed colour for her.

I was to make a ball gown in lurex – a beautiful piece of fabric. The pattern was supplied and when I went to plan it out found I couldn’t get it out without having to turn the material the other way. Not having worked with lurex I examined left, right, up, down, etc, and saw it should be cut the one way. So I got the client up. She herself was an accomplished dressmaker but didn’t want to tackle this. So over the pattern we pondered. At last she suggested turning the extension of one panel for length up the other way. I told her of the ‘one way’ but she said “oh I don’t mind” so with her permission I cut and eventually made it up. Looking at it straight on it looked perfect but looking down the skirt this piece stuck out so boldly and I was really upset. But she paid for it and took it away but I’ve got a feeling she never wore that frock. It taught me a lesson to listen to my instincts.

Dressmaker identified as “JSM”

I started (at Austin Browns in November) 1962. I worked as a hand finisher, which they don’t really … it’s a foreign word these days. We had very interesting garments to do in those days. I worked with this one particular lady and we made these coats for a place in Wellington. They were very expensive … in those days, one pound, one shilling and eightpence was the weekly apprenticeship wage, and we did these coats and they were thirty-five pounds. That was a lot of money. And all the buttons were hand done. Linings were sewn in, but we had to put interfacing on – cross stitch it all on – and even the labels; either side was sewn by machine, but we had to cross stitch the labels, the top and the bottom. And then you had to tack your hem up and cross stitch, and all the linings were done by hand – the bottoms of the hems and linings.

I’ll never forget, I was trusted this day to cut this lining and I forgot to pin it to get the (pleat), and I cut it too short. I suppose by a quarter inch, because it had to have the pleat over it and it was expensive lining; satin. (Each lining was cut individually). I never ever made that mistake twice.

We weren’t a big, big company. We were perhaps a staff of thirty, but it was never a great big company like some of the firms … Way back, we used to do this one garment, and it had a band around it, and it had a yoke, and on the yoke it had a Dior rose. Well, the band had to be blindstitched by hand, and these roses had to be made up … we reckon every woman in the country must have had half a dozen of them. We put them out in their hundreds. It was an older ladies’ style coat and there were hundreds of them. I was a supervisor (and) at one stage there I had to check all the garments and they never liked me for that because I sent stuff back. I had never been a machinist at that stage – you sort of didn’t know the difficulties that the girls (faced). So I was basically self taught (at machining). I used to just watch the others.