

‘The Marriage Market’

MATRIMONIAL AGENCIES AND THE MATRIMONIAL ADVERTISEMENT IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY NEW ZEALAND



THE USE OF INTERMEDIARIES in the negotiation of marriages is not a modern concept; many cultures and societies throughout time have used the services of matchmakers in arranging prudential marriages. Although this is frequently a culturally prescribed and unpaid role, falling to a highly respected elder of the society, a customary or token payment can nevertheless be an acceptable part of the process.¹ In this same way, matrimonial agencies throughout the Western world acted as matchmakers or intermediaries during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but as a purely commercial operation rather than as a cultural or a social service. To date, historical examinations of courtship and marriage in New Zealand have largely drawn upon the personal correspondence of couples as well as cultural products, such as novels and film, to access the personal and emotional dimensions of love.² Yet, not every couple met at church or through family acquaintances. In the early twentieth century, some individuals chose to put their faith in newspaper advertisements placed by matrimonial agents. Drawing upon a dataset of 1717 matrimonial advertisements published in New Zealand newspapers, this article examines the growth of matrimonial agencies in New Zealand and their business practices, and considers why some men and women sought assistance in seeking a life partner.

According to H.G. Cocks’s English study, the commercial aspect of agencies lent an unsavoury mercenary air to these businesses, and arranging introductions or marriages for monetary payment or profit was considered unseemly, disreputable, fraudulent and aligned to fortune-hunting.³ He argues that using the services of an agency was definitely not something respectable people did, particularly women.⁴ The New Zealand newspapers questioned the genuineness of those using the agencies’ services, with accounts of misrepresentation on both sides of the marital ledger frequently appearing in the popular press.⁵ Yet matrimonial agencies continued to not only carve out a place for themselves as viable businesses in New Zealand, but to thrive, particularly during the interwar period.

To track the growth of these businesses and gain insight into their clientele, we collated matrimonial advertisements placed in the personal columns and

classified sections of four newspapers available through Papers Past for the period 1900 to 1935 when there was a significant increase in the number of agencies operating. Although their clientele came from all over the country, agencies were predominantly located in urban centres, so we concentrated on metropolitan newspapers: the *New Zealand Herald* (Auckland morning paper); the *Auckland Star* (evening paper); the *Evening Post* (Wellington); and the *Star* (Christchurch).⁶ Records in Papers Past for the *Star* ceased in 1917, so from 1920 onward the *Press* was substituted as the main Christchurch newspaper.⁷ To avoid distorting the dataset with the absence of a second large segment of single men serving abroad during World War II, 1935 was chosen as the endpoint. Duplicated or multiple insertions were removed, resulting in a dataset of 1717 unique advertisements. Of these, 871 (51%) were inserted by matrimonial agencies. Amongst this number, 129 were non-specific, inserted to advertise the services of the agencies themselves and were not placed on behalf of any client.⁸ Some advertisements by matrimonial agencies were for multiple clients; that is, three ladies or four gentlemen were advertised together in a single insertion. These have been counted as single advertisements.

With almost no existing archival material available on their activities, newspaper articles and advertisements are key sources for tracing the development of matrimonial agencies in New Zealand. Cocks argues that matrimonial advertisements ‘are usually treated as an amusing curiosity or quaint relic from a more formal era of courtship’.⁹ They are a difficult genre because unknown and unverifiable agents advertised on behalf of their clients, we do not know the extent to which newspaper editors shaped the content, and uncertainty exists over the veracity of the advertisements. Notwithstanding these issues, tracking newspaper advertising not only helps shed light on the development of these businesses in New Zealand, but also illuminates how agencies were perceived by the print media, who subjected their methods to intense scrutiny despite willingness to provide column inches to them.

In their use of newspapers to both promote their business and to advertise on behalf of their clients, it is possible to build a picture of the agencies’ clientele and their motivations. As Cocks has argued with regard to Britain, in deploying a pragmatic approach to finding a partner, advertisers perceived marriage as a contractual arrangement and used the matrimonial advertisement as ‘a means of assessing marital worth’.¹⁰ A close assessment of the advertisements themselves, however, suggests that companionship was sought for emotional (although not necessarily romantic) reasons. It appears that single women were the greatest users of matrimonial agencies, especially during the interwar years.¹¹ The language of the advertisements suggests that

mutuality and emotional connections became increasingly desirable, with companionship and loneliness being regularly listed as reasons for seeking a marriage partner, particularly in the decade 1925 to 1935. Nevertheless, pragmatic and realistic expectations continued to be strongly signalled for both men and women, reflecting the high value society placed on the specifically gendered contract of marriage in which women were expected to become home-makers and mothers, while men were expected to be the breadwinners and to hold financial and material responsibility for the family unit. Matrimonial agencies did not seek to disrupt the gender order but relied on their clientele's acceptance of these norms for the very existence of their business, and financial success.

Matrimonial Advertisements

Almost as soon as the newspaper was invented, matrimonial advertisements appeared in print.¹² As vehicles for communication within the population, newspapers were the mass media of the nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth centuries, having a vital role in keeping the public informed of news and events, and also providing a service to the community by carrying classified advertisements. Inexpensive and highly portable, newspapers could be disseminated easily and quickly throughout the populace.¹³ While newspapers offer a unique set of observations into the character of communities and their inhabitants, historians have tended to overlook the classified advertisement as a historical source.¹⁴ Recognizing this, Tony Ballantyne called on New Zealand historians to consider the colonial newspaper as 'assemblages' constituted of 'materials, skills, technologies, financial arrangements and cultural conventions'.¹⁵ One of those 'assemblages' is the advertisement, which Ballantyne described as 'central to the commercial viability of publication'.¹⁶ By the 1920s the classified sections of New Zealand newspapers expanded to encompass a dedicated matrimonial column in recognition of the value of these advertisements as a growing source of revenue.¹⁷

Apart from their financial significance, personal and classified advertisements, like advice columns, 'fashioned social connections'.¹⁸ In tracing the history of the personal advertisement in Britain, Cocks noted the early newspaper advertisements 'catered for those slightly at odds with traditional forms of courtship and morality', and for people on the fringe of polite society.¹⁹ By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, matrimonial and personal advertising increased in Britain. The growth of cities, increasing industrialization and division of labour meant that established social networks and traditional methods of making new acquaintances were becoming untenable.²⁰ In response to these structural changes in British

society, newspapers and periodicals solely devoted to matrimonial and personal advertising appeared and were widely used. According to Debra Merskin and Mara Huberlie, traditional interpersonal networks between kin and other social groupings became increasingly fragmented with the escalating complexity of society, leading to the newspaper becoming the primary source of social information that would otherwise have been obtained through personal contacts.²¹ In this way, newspapers adopted a new function, that of interpersonal intermediary.²² As New Zealand's very small population did not lend itself to the large-scale operation of a dedicated matrimonial press, the classified sections of regional and metropolitan newspapers, which included personal columns, were the only option for those seeking to meet with a suitable life partner through advertisement.²³

Two types of matrimonial advertisements appeared in New Zealand newspapers: those placed by individuals; and those inserted by matrimonial agencies on behalf of their clients.²⁴ An advertisement's purpose is to entice the reader, or to attract attention. Retail advertisements aim to sell products and services, but those in the personal or classified columns are more in the nature of a social service, and range from reuniting owners with lost items or pets, listing personal effects for sale, advertising rooms and homes to rent, and situations vacant, to encrypted private conversations held within the public forum of a newspaper. Matrimonial advertisements were a hybrid of both categories, aiming to attract the attention of a potential life partner, with the result of a (hopefully) satisfactory outcome for both parties.²⁵

Advertising by newspaper incurred a high degree of financial commitment relative to the retail price of the newspaper. For example, although the purchase price of the *Herald* doubled, rising to two pence in 1920, the cost of advertising in the classified section underwent several changes during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Between 1910 and 1920, an advertiser paid a set rate of 1s for 18 words for a single insertion, and 2s 6d for the same advertisement in three consecutive insertions. During 1920, advertising costs in the classified section were split depending on the number of words in the advertisement. By 1930 the average advertisement of around 25 words attracted a financial investment of 2s 6d for a single insertion, and 7s for three consecutive issues. The prices rose again in 1931 to a cost of 1s for up to and including 12 words, and 3s for between 25 and 30 words for a single insertion. Three consecutive insertions for a 25-word advertisement would set the advertiser back 8s 6d. These prices remained stable until the end of this study at 1935.²⁶ As the average wage for unmarried men was just under £4 per week in 1926, and £2 per week for unmarried women, the price of eight shillings for an advertisement was a serious financial consideration,

particularly for women.²⁷ Individuals who chose to go through a matrimonial agency were subject to further fees, including charges associated with registration, introductions and other services.

Limited by the number of words available for the price a person was prepared to pay, personal column advertisers had to be concise in descriptions of their own personal attributes and to prioritize the qualities that they considered to be the most desirable in a potential mate.²⁸ Code-words were regularly used, and these often related to the character traits of the advertiser. 'Genuine', 'Honest', 'Cheerful', 'Healthy' and 'Honourable' often appeared, as did reference to employment, with 'Tradesman', 'Farmer', 'Nurse' and 'Worker' frequently used. In this way, the seeker hoped to find a match, in an average of 25 words and an investment of several shillings, with a suitable person in a similar situation or social level, in order to maximize the chance of compatibility.

Matrimonial agents also aimed to build their clientele through repetition of certain words, such as 'privacy' and 'confidentiality'. For instance, because the 129 general advertisements placed by agencies between 1900 and 1935 were designed to engage with and to entice the reader to place their business with that particular agency, all emphasized their trustworthiness and professionalism. Such strategies were good business practice, and most agencies followed this pattern, taking their cue from Hannaford's, New Zealand's first matrimonial agency.

Matrimonial Agencies

Although matrimonial agencies were active in New Zealand prior to 1900, they were few in number. Between 1870 and 1911, Auckland's Hannaford Matrimonial Agency was the country's predominant bureau. It arose out of a domestic service registry or labour exchange founded in 1863 by Englishman Thomas Brown Hannaford. Domestic service registries were operating from the 1860s, offering to find employment for servants who were experienced in general domestic work.²⁹ Hannaford sought to capitalize on a government campaign launched in the 1870s to attract young, single women to New Zealand from Britain, initially as domestic servants to fill the labour gap, but also with the expectation that they would marry within a reasonable period of time after arrival.³⁰ Seeing a business opportunity in the matrimonial agency, Hannaford offered this service for a fee from 1870 alongside his domestic service labour exchange.³¹

As the earliest bureau, Hannaford's set the pattern for the commercial marriage agencies that followed. In 1886 Hannaford supplied a detailed description to the *Observer* of the process undertaken for assessing new male clients, providing some insight into how his business operated.³² Stressing

the importance of privacy and respectability, the agency required gentlemen to complete a questionnaire with general and specific information regarding both the applicants themselves and what they were seeking in a wife. They were also asked to provide a photograph, although this same requirement did not apply to women. Information required included full name, address and age; religion; state of health; marital status; occupation; average income per annum; and the name of a character referee who could vouch for them. Only three questions related to the applicant’s expectations of the potential wife: her religion; a preferred age range; and an option to outline other specified requirements or expectations not detailed elsewhere on the form.³³ As the matrimonial business developed as an offshoot of Hannaford’s labour exchange, it is reasonable to infer that this form had evolved from a similar one used for the domestic service registry, indicating strong links between the two businesses.

In using questionnaires to obtain a general overview of the applicant, Hannaford utilized what would become the established best practice of matrimonial agencies. When Heather Jenner and Mary Oliver established the Heather Jenner Matrimonial Agency in London in 1939, a combination of questionnaire and personal, business-like interview was also used to screen applicants.³⁴ This particular agency targeted the upper-class echelons of London society, with a correspondingly high fee structure of five guineas on application, and a further payment of 20 guineas after the marriage, thus ensuring that only those who were both serious about seeking matrimony and had the wherewithal to move in the higher levels of society were able to use their services.³⁵ As New Zealand did not have either a strongly demarcated class system or a sufficiently sized population to be selective about customers, Hannaford’s catered to any and all who could pay the fees.

Making use of the newspaper to promote the business operation was essential, but agents also needed to be proactive in order to maintain the respectability of their brand, particularly as the public’s perception of matrimonial agencies, internationally and within New Zealand, linked them with immoral practices. According to an 1897 article in Christchurch’s *Press* newspaper, agencies were often considered to be mercenary and self-serving, run by operators of dubious character and morals.³⁶ Challenging such perceptions required building a positive reputation. Hannaford, for instance, regularly and repeatedly drew attention to his scrupulous discretion and professional business practices in his advertisements. Potential clients were reassured that ‘Inviolable secrecy [was] assured.’³⁷ A letter sent in reply to those who enquired after his services stated that ‘every precaution that ordinary human ability can devise has been taken to ensure good faith

and protect respectable females (availing themselves of my services) from becoming the victims of designing and unprincipled characters.' This same form letter also reiterated that Hannaford conducted his business 'with HONESTY AND GOOD FAITH', and that he would make 'rigid and searching enquiries' regarding the characters of those gentlemen who wished to proceed with their applications, presumably to ensure the security and to maintain the respectability of his female clients. Hannaford also informed all potential clients in this letter that he would not tolerate anyone attempting to make a mockery of either himself or his business, and that he and his agency were to be taken seriously.³⁸

Agencies were first and foremost commercial operations, and as such were looking to make a profit from those who used their services. As with any business, advertising was key to ensuring a steady supply of clientele, and therefore income. Ideally, once a successful match was made, there should be no possibility of repeat business, so it was essential for the agencies to replace clients who had made a match with new customers. The more respectable or high value the agency appeared to be, the more likely it was to attract clients, especially those from a higher (and therefore wealthier) stratum of society.

Through their advertisements, agencies emphasized qualities of reliability, trustworthiness, genuineness and discretion. For example, in 1922 Burnett's (Auckland) advertised that it was an 'Established Matrimonial Agency — reliable, satisfactory, confidential.'³⁹ The language of these advertisements sought to reassure potential clients that their future happiness (and financial investment) was in careful and discreet hands, although stopping short of actually guaranteeing a match. Regular use of such descriptors as 'absolutely genuine', 'confidential' and 'reliable' reinforced the notion of respectability and reputability of the business in the reader's mind. Mme Dwere, an Auckland agency, used advertisements to indicate that both the business and clientele were a cut above the regular agencies. Using phrases such as 'Absolutely attractive wealthy lady', and 'Wealthy English gentleman ... commanding high position', Mme Dwere aligned her brand with only the wealthiest and highest levels of society.⁴⁰ By doing so, she differentiated her business from other agencies active at the same time, emphasizing her selectivity, and portraying her agency as more elite than her competitors. Hannaford's, however, had little need to add these marketing descriptors to its advertisements. By the early 1900s, its name and business were so well-known in Auckland that business-like advertisements were placed, with little or no hyperbolic marketing description of either the client or the agency itself.

Despite efforts to build a positive reputation, there was a public perception that those who used agencies risked becoming victims of crime. New Zealand

was not immune from threats to morality and criminal intent in the guise of the matrimonial agency. In 1886, a London-based matrimonial agent was advertising heavily in several New Zealand newspapers that it would, for the sum of 2 shillings (to meet preliminary expenses), forward ‘the addresses of respectable young women who are willing to communicate with bona fide Tradesmen, Farmers, and others desirous of meeting with useful wives. They will be supplied from the Agricultural Districts of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, as well as the Continent of Europe.’⁴¹ These advertisements raised a level of concern sufficient to warrant an international police investigation on suspicion of embezzlement.⁴² These cases were sometimes perpetrated by agency owners, but more often than not by the clients themselves. In 1897 the *Nelson Evening Mail* published a salacious report of a married Australian man who had advertised for a wife through a matrimonial agency, had swindled sums of money from women who had replied to him, and had committed bigamy.⁴³ A June 1911 *Truth* article highlighted the case of Thomas McMillan, a married man ‘who inserted an advertisement in the local newspapers and victimised [two] women by offering them marriage.’⁴⁴ He had falsely presented himself to the women as the owner of a sheep station, obtaining from them sums of money as well as gifts of a gold watch with promises of marriage. A Lyttelton widow ‘met a young fellow of twenty-nine as the result of a matrimonial ad., and although she was the mother of six youngsters, Harvey Roland Birch Miles promised to take her and the lot for better or for worse.’⁴⁵ Miles obtained money from her, claiming he needed it to cover the cost of a trip to England to access funds bequeathed to him by his mother, but this was a lie. A court case revealed he was married, and that his mother was very much alive. Agencies were particularly associated with the crime of bigamy, where the client of the agency passed himself off as single while still legally married. In 1916, 48-year-old retired farmer Alfred Mitchell met an 18-year-old girl through an un-named matrimonial agency. He shortly thereafter married her under an assumed name, but was arrested for bigamy while on ‘honeymoon’ in Morrinsville.⁴⁶ Such was the concern, Rev. Wilson of the Auckland Central Mission described agencies as an ‘unmitigated evil’.⁴⁷

Truth mounted a campaign against matrimonial advertising in the 1920s, pressing for legislative action to protect women from the menace of bogus newspaper advertisements. The Wanted columns, *Truth* argued, offered an ‘opportunity to crooks, moral degenerates, and other wrongdoers’ to ‘locate victims’ through ‘carefully worded offers of attractive business propositions or positions’.⁴⁸ It was particularly important to target personal columns, for a ‘searching inquiry into certain matrimonial advertisements would doubtless

reveal the hidden hand of the sexually unbalanced just as surely as would a number of those harmless looking advertisements that inquire for travelling companions, [or] housekeepers'. *Truth* particularly sought to expose any hint of financial fraud. In 1927, the newspaper targeted Thomas Underdown, who had opened a matrimonial bureau in Wellington designed for 'those shy and bashful young ladies, near-flappers and, in fact, all spinsters of doubtful vintage who have not yet discovered their beau'.⁴⁹ Secrecy was offered and confidentiality guaranteed. *Truth* focused on the financial outlay required of clients to access the full range of services Underdown offered. Filling in a form attracted a registration fee of 10s 6d. An introduction to a 'lady client' incurred a further fee of five guineas, paid in advance. If a client used all Underdown's services the total cost, revealed *Truth*, was a substantial £5 15s 6d, more than the average weekly wage for an unmarried man.⁵⁰

It was not uncommon, however, for agencies to offer a variety of services in aid of 'making marriage easy'. Not only could they find the bride or groom, but all aspects of the wedding itself could be arranged by the agent. Hannaford's, in its own general advertising, advised potential clients that it was 'not confined solely to obtaining "Life Partners" for gentlemen in town, but those who have suited themselves can have all the preliminaries taken off their hands....They can then be married any day or hour they like without the least trouble on their part, everything being done for them.'⁵¹ In essence, Hannaford's marketed itself not only as a matrimonial agent, but also as a wedding planner, for both its own clients and those who had found their own 'Life Partners'. Other agencies offered the same or similar services. All aspects of the wedding, from arranging the licence, booking the church and minister and finding witnesses, down to such details as flowers and the wedding ring itself, could be organized by the matrimonial agent.⁵² Couples were also invited to hold the wedding ceremony on business premises, such as Allan Wilson and Frances Hillary, who married in February 1895 at the Matrimonial Agency, Chancery Lane, in Christchurch's Cathedral Square.⁵³ All these additional services would have attracted corresponding fees, increasing the potential profit the agent could make from the match.

Not only were clients potentially putting themselves in danger of being swindled or worse, but when things went awry public ridicule was also a very real risk for both agencies and their clients. In 1926, both the male and female clients of an agency found themselves in court over a financial debt that had not been repaid before the anticipated wedding, which was subsequently called off. During the course of the trial, as the widowed fiancée, Mrs Evelyn Cowan (engaged to a Mr Herbert Maxwell), gave evidence, the journalist covering the case reported that laughter in the court greeted each answer she gave to

questions posed by the barristers.⁵⁴ While Mrs Cowan may have played a comedic turn to the questioning, nevertheless, the plight of the aggrieved was treated as entertainment for the public gallery and also for the *Auckland Star*'s reporter and readers, who appeared to have little sympathy for the couple's predicament. By reporting that they had met through the offices of a matrimonial agency, the journalist reiterated to the general public that they then effectively got what they deserved. With their names published in a widely-read metropolitan newspaper, public scorn and ridicule might possibly have fallen upon them, their children (both had been married prior), and perhaps their respective wider circles of family and friends. The names of the agencies concerned, however, were not reported. In the cases where it had been the client themselves that had been the swindler or perpetrator, their reported association with a matrimonial agency without naming the actual agency served to reinforce the public's perception that *all* agencies were less than reputable, and that they facilitated these criminal or morally reprehensible actions.

Matrimonial Agency Clientele

By 1935, there were 13 matrimonial agencies in operation, mainly in Auckland. This suggests a growing acceptability of such agencies, with a resultant upsurge in market share as their customers, particularly women (see Table 2), sought their services. Reports that agencies were becoming socially acceptable elsewhere may have encouraged women to place their faith, and money, with a matrimonial agent.⁵⁵

Advertisements, in addition to an increasing number of newspaper articles describing the phenomenon, tell us something about those who used the agencies' services. In 1921 a New Zealand journalist suspected those who sought out the services of an agency were mainly the shy and bashful, or from rural areas. 'Much of the work of the matrimonial agencies is therefore done among farmers' daughters, young farmers on lonely selections, or widowers seeking companionship in late or middle life.'⁵⁶ According to one article in the *Auckland Star* in 1930, those who took up the services offered by agencies were quite often widowed farmers, and 'in despair to know how to look after the family and the farm at the same time.'⁵⁷ Use of a matrimonial agency is suggestive of pragmatism, but motivations were much more complex. Both widows and widowers, for instance, frequently described themselves in advertisements as being lonely, and looking for companionship. Practical and emotional motivations, therefore, were strong incentives for both widows and widowers to use the services of a matrimonial agency.

Those who used agencies to seek marriage partners were, however, representative of a broad range of ages and situations in life. Of the newspaper

advertisers who stated their ages, and assuming they were honest, the majority fell within the 20 to 40 range, correlating with data in each national census for the period where by far the largest group of unmarried male and female adults were in the 20 to 30 age range. Of these, female advertisers were the highest group (Table 1). A number of advertisers of both genders listed themselves as ‘young’, ‘middle-aged’ or ‘elderly’, or did not state their age at all. From the total of 1717 unique advertisements, those placed by agencies containing multiple clients were excluded from Table 1, as the ages of the individuals concerned ranged widely, and each multiple client advertisement was treated as a single insertion.

	20-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	Young	Mid.	Elderly	None	Total
Male	190	180	97	53	20	94	26	16	179	855
Female	237	286	88	56	5	40	35	9	97	853
Total	427	466	185	109	25	134	61	25	276	1708

Table 1: Ages of Advertisers by Gender, 1900-1935

Source: *New Zealand Herald, Auckland Star, Evening Post, Star.*

As Table 1 illustrates, women in the 20–40 age group were substantially more likely to state their age than men in the same age band. The majority of female advertisers represented themselves as within these prime child-bearing years. It is likely that those women who stated their ages as ‘young’ were also within this age range. Of the female advertisers in the 20 to 30 age range, the majority had employed the services of matrimonial agencies (67%). For men in the same age range, the majority placed private advertisements (77%). As the range of ages increased, the number of advertisers, both private and agency, decreased. The proportion of women utilizing agencies remained higher for all stated ages than those who placed private advertisements, however. More women placing private advertisements stated their ages in an indeterminate way as elderly, young or no age at all than those going through agencies.

During the first three decades of the twentieth century unmarried men consistently outnumbered unmarried women in the general population, but single women were the greatest users of advertisements by the 1930s, increasing sharply in the interwar period (see Table 2). This is a remarkable increase, considering the tarnished reputation of these businesses, and the heavy weighting accorded to respectability on the list of desirable attributes for potential husbands. Although there was a slight but steady increase in matrimonial agencies advertising on behalf of male clients between 1905 and 1930, the number of male clients also jumped significantly in 1935 by half as

much as the combined total for the years previously. Similarly, the number of female clients remained somewhat less than that of males initially but increased substantially in 1925 and then again in 1935. From 1925, women made up the majority of the agencies’ client base, with 1.5 times more women than men making use of the services offered. Female clients consistently outnumbered male clients for the years 1925, 1930 and 1935.

	Male	Female	General
1905	0	4	0
1910	8	4	0
1915	12	6	13
1920	28	9	4
1925	22	103	67
1930	31	74	44
1935	188	253	1
Total	289	453	129

Table 2: Matrimonial Agency Advertisements by Gender of Client, 1900-1935

Source: *New Zealand Herald, Auckland Star, Evening Post, Star.*

Note: ‘General’ advertisements are those placed by the agency to advertise their business, rather than on behalf of a client.

Women may have turned to matrimonial agencies as their leisure time reduced with increased employment outside the home. Greater opportunities for waged positions became available, with office, retail and industrial work opening up for single women in the first third of the twentieth century.⁵⁸ By taking employment outside the home, it may have followed that single women increased their opportunities for meeting potential husbands. Long hours of paid work, coupled with labour intensive methods of housework and personal chores, however, meant that single women had little leisure time to pursue social interaction. If new to the city, women had few avenues to make acquaintances with the opposite sex, even with their greater level of financial independence and a loosening of the social conventions around introductions and chaperones during the immediate post-war period.⁵⁹ Introductions were customarily made through relatives or friends, or under the aegis of socially prescribed events such as church attendance or organized dances. Churches of all denominations encouraged single men and women to interact, and often held organized events and functions to permit socially acceptable, respectable and safe contact between unmarried adults. As Charlotte Greenhalgh has noted, the possibility of romantic opportunities was an important drawcard for church attendance of single adults.⁶⁰

Other avenues or opportunities to increase social contact included the cinema and regular visits to the dance halls. At a dance, the social proscriptions around introductions to complete strangers were eased or suspended through rituals and conventions that developed around the process of a man asking a woman to dance. Rather than waiting for a mutual acquaintance to facilitate an introduction, women would wait on one side of the hall for a man to approach, make his offer for the dance set, and be accepted.⁶¹ This new convention got around the problem for women of needing to know someone who could make an introduction when they were newly arrived in the city, as well as avoiding committing the serious social *faux pas* of brazenly introducing themselves to a complete stranger of the opposite sex. In this way, a high level of social respectability was maintained at the same time as a new acquaintance (and potential marriage partner) was made. Yet, as the author of a letter published in the Christchurch *Press* noted, while the church, the subscription dance and amateur theatricals were each an important 'conduit for match-making', failing these 'there is the Marriage Bureau'.⁶²

Another possible reason women turned to agencies for assistance in finding potential partners may have been a desire to maintain a respectable distance between themselves and the socially proscribed act of interacting with unacquainted men. Placing their request into the hands of an intermediary enabled women to retain a sense of personal respectability and security, while the hard work of vetting potential candidates was supposedly carried out by an independent agent. The agent then could make the required face-to-face introduction, maintaining a semblance of social respectability. This, coupled with an aversion to the necessary risk-taking inherent in direct advertising, indicates that women may have been prepared to use agencies in spite of their perceived reputation, as this was still considered more respectable or safer than being seen to be 'forward' or 'shameless' by placing their own advertisement. It is also perhaps likely that women considered that men would be less inclined to treat them with respect if they advertised directly, while the use of an agency indicated that they were taking the search for matrimony seriously.

Women's use of matrimonial agencies may have been assisted by the growing number of female business owner/operators during this period. This gender demarcation assisted in preserving the reputation and dignity of female clientele, as well as being seen to be less embarrassing or socially threatening. By the early decades of the twentieth century many matrimonial agencies were operated by women, and they were sometimes run alongside or in conjunction with other commercial enterprises. As one example, Dorothy Baker, who was active in Auckland between 1931 and

1936, owned and operated a matrimonial correspondence club in conjunction with the matrimonial agency, as well as a secretarial service offering typing, stenography and 'duplicating'.⁶³ She was a married 27-year-old when she placed her first advertisement as a matrimonial agent on 21 November 1931 in the *Auckland Star*. Based at 177 Queen's Arcade in lower Queen Street in central Auckland, Baker also owned and ran Dominion Brokers Ltd from the same office, a 'business of a similar nature' to her matrimonial agency.⁶⁴ Dorothy Baker's Matrimonial Agency placed a total of 132 advertisements, in both the *New Zealand Herald* and the *Auckland Star*, making Baker the third most prolific agency advertiser during the sampling period of the dataset, behind 36 Phoenix Chambers (227) and Gaybie Verette (183).⁶⁵ All three agencies were Auckland-based.

Matrimonial agencies succeeded in becoming viable businesses, meeting a market need. Yet, they did so when women were increasingly delaying marriage. Just at the time when women's employment opportunities expanded, 'from the 1880s and 1890s there was a rapid increase in the proportion of women at young ages who had never married', and this pattern accelerated in the early decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁶ Those women who either placed advertisements directly or who utilized a matrimonial agency to find a husband may have been unusual for taking direct action in their search for husbands.⁶⁷ For some, economic reasons were a catalyst for turning to matrimonial agencies, particularly during the Great Depression, which amplified the financial and material vulnerability of single adults, particularly of widows with children. During this era of financial constraint, the agony aunt columns of the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* relegated romantic attachment to the very bottom of the 'must have' list, advising single women to first rationally select a potential husband with good prospects, and *then* learn to love him.⁶⁸ Matrimonial agencies potentially offered a valuable service for those in economically difficult circumstances.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the expectation became that women would enter the workforce for a brief period after school and prior to marriage.⁶⁹ As with domestic service, paid work was perceived as preparation for life within marriage, bringing not only the skills developed through working, but also a degree of financial contribution to the establishment of a new household.⁷⁰ Yet, marriage patterns were undergoing transition during the interwar years, with '27% of women and 38% of men under age of thirty' having never married by the early 1930s.⁷¹ Not all women had the opportunity to marry. A cohort lost their beaux through external factors (i.e. World War I) and made a conscious decision not to replace their affections. Others remained single through other circumstances, such as the requirement

to remain at home to care for elderly parents, or a simple choice to remain single. A study of women aged between 70 and 92 conducted by the Society for Research on Women in 1982 noted that 11 out of the 51 participants had not married.⁷² This group of women had spent a considerable number of years after leaving school caring for frail and sick parents, or assisting with the running of the household and looking after younger siblings.⁷³

Men who chose to remain as bachelors may not have felt as much social or peer expectation to marry, although as Jock Phillips notes, they too ‘suffered under the monolithic expectation that any “normal man” should settle down with a wife and family.’⁷⁴ During the interwar years, the numbers of men never married fell from 32% in 1921 to 30% in 1936, with men marrying in their late twenties, on average, meaning the ‘vast majority of men during the inter-war period were married and raising a family by their mid-thirties’.⁷⁵ As marriage conferred authority and responsibility, the attachment of a wife and children brought increased social status and greater opportunities for advancement in a man’s working life.⁷⁶ By the 1950s the normal or hegemonic societal expectation in New Zealand for all men was therefore to marry, and to live in their own home with a wife and children.

Conclusion

Although very few records remain that give detailed accounts of the practices of matrimonial agencies, it would appear that the basic principles of a questionnaire and personal interview for applicants was the established practice, and that this did not change even through to the late twentieth century. Diversification of the business of the agencies resulted in them offering a complete wedding planning service, taking the burden of organization off the happy couple, and making the logistical aspects of marriage easy. The respectability of both the agencies and their owners was often called into question, and sometimes with good reason as some clients (and agents) either perpetrated or fell victim to scams and swindles. The risk of embezzlement or public ridicule was high, as the nature of the business of matchmaking ensured the focus was on profit, rather than the well-being of the clients as with traditional cultural matchmakers. Matrimonial agency use increased greatly in spite of their somewhat dubious reputations, however, especially between 1925 and 1935, possibly as a reaction to the increase in social acceptability of matrimonial agencies. Economic realities of financial hardship caused by the Depression in the early 1930s may also have created strong motives for single women or widows with children to seek assistance with introductions to potential spouses.

Although emotional reasons such as ‘loneliness’ for seeking marriage partners were articulated more during the latter part of the interwar period,

nevertheless the language of pragmatism and practicality remained paramount in advertising for matrimony. Shifts in the language of the advertisements signal changing expectations around relationships encompassing mutuality, yet these new ideas did not challenge the traditional gendered expectations of marriage. Utilizing a matrimonial agency incurred a considerable financial outlay, indicating that the advertiser was not taking the search for a spouse lightly and had serious intentions about entering the institution of matrimony. The potential risk of becoming victim to criminal activity or to public ridicule with choosing this method to meet partners failed to deter those in search of a 'life companion'. Marriage offered a conventional route to the comforts of life: a household where women took care of the internal domestic routines that underpinned the external male working world. There, couples might both expect to find mutual affection, daily support and, hopefully, love.

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NOTES

1 Colleen Murray and Naoko Kimura, 'Multiplicity of paths to couple formation in Japan', in Raeann Hamon and Bron Ingoldsby, eds, *Mate Selection Across Cultures*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2003, p.259; James Peoples and Garrick Bailey, *Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, 9th ed., Cengage Learning, Belmont, 2012, p.169; *Auckland Star* (AS), 31 March 1928, p.1.

2 Studies include: Raewyn Dalziel, "'Making Us One": Courtship and Marriage in Colonial New Zealand', *Turnbull Library Record*, 19, 1 (1986), pp.7–26; Margot Fry, *Tom's Letters: The Private World of Thomas King, Victorian Gentleman*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2001; Sophie Jerram, *Posted Love: New Zealand Love Letters*, Penguin, Auckland, 2004; Charlotte Greenhalgh, 'Bush Cinderellas: Young New Zealanders and Romance at the Movies, 1919–1939', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 44, 1 (2010), pp.1–21; Charlotte Greenhalgh, 'Becoming 'Completely One': Love Letters and New Zealand's Interwar Romantic Culture', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 51, 1 (2017), pp.135–63; Charlotte Greenhalgh, 'The Church as a Site of Romance', in Geoffrey Troughton and Hugh Morrison, eds, *The Spirit of the Past: Essays on Christianity in New Zealand History*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2011, pp.126–41; Deborah Montgomerie, 'New Women and Not-So-New Men: Discussions about Marriage in New Zealand, 1890–1914', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 51, 1 (2017), pp.36–64; Deborah Montgomerie, *Love in a Time of War: Letter writing in the Second World War*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2005.

3 H.G. Cocks, *Classified: The Secret History of the Personal Column*, Penguin, London, 2009, p.122.

4 Cocks, *Classified*, p.122.

5 *Observer*, 2 December 1888, p.3; *New Zealand Herald* (NZH), 10 April 1880, p.4.

6 Papers Past: <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers>.

7 Due to the sheer number of advertisements over the period examined, we sampled advertisements placed throughout the year in the four targeted newspapers for every fifth year during the period 1900 to 1915. Due to the marked increase in the number of advertisements after 1920, for the years 1920, 1925, 1930 and 1935 respectively only advertisements placed between the 14th and 21st inclusive of each month were collected.

8 These services advertisements are identified as 'General'.

9 Harry Cocks, 'The cost of marriage and the matrimonial agency in late Victorian Britain', *Social History*, 38, 1 (2013), p.67. On the issue of editorial control, although focused on the mid-nineteenth century see, Kellie Holzer, "'More Ridiculous Than Sad": Editing the Matrimonials in the *London Journal*', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 36, 3 (2014), pp.233–49.

10 Cocks, 'The cost of marriage', p.67.

11 The 1916 census shows the number of single women (50,941) exceeded the number of single men (46,899) between the ages of 20–30 by 4042, but this is to be expected as men in this age range would have been overseas at the time of the census. *Results of a Census of the Dominion of New Zealand Taken for the Night of 15th October 1916*, Government Printer, Wellington, 1920, pp.81–82. Although the period examined encompasses World War I, there is no evidence that a generation of 'lost wives' was created as a result of the loss of unmarried men during the war; to the contrary, data from each census from 1901 to 1936 indicates that there continued to be significantly more unmarried men than unmarried women in total. The 20–30 age range of unmarried adults during the 1916 census reported a small increase of unmarried women over men.

12 Cocks, *Classified*, p.viii.

13 Tony Ballantyne, *Talking, Listening, Writing, Reading: Communication and Colonisation*, Allan Martin Lecture, Canberra, 2009, p.19.

14 Matt Morris is one of the few New Zealand historians to use classifieds as a historical source. In his doctoral thesis on home gardening, Morris used property advertisements placed in Christchurch newspapers to trace shifting attitudes to gardening in that city between the 1850s and the 1950s: Matt Morris, ‘A History of Christchurch Home Gardening from Colonisation to the Queen’s Visit: Gardening Culture in a Particular Society and Environment’, PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 2006.

15 Tony Ballantyne, ‘Reading the Newspaper in Colonial Otago’, *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, 12 (2011), p.49. Although his focus is advice columns, Adrian Bingham pays close attention to the popular press in mid-twentieth-century Britain, arguing for its significance as a forum for producing and shaping ideas about class, gender, sexuality and morality: Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life and the British Popular Press 1918–1978*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009; Adrian Bingham, ‘Problem pages and British sexual culture, c.1930s to 1970s’, *Media History*, 18, 1 (2012), pp.51–63.

16 Ballantyne, ‘Reading the Newspaper’, p.51.

17 The increasing number of matrimonial advertisements was sufficient for them to be separated from the personal column. Although column length for both personal and matrimonial advertisements was not significant overall, this separation is an indication of the increasing amount of categorization that developed in the classified section. For example, *Press*, 16 November 1901, p.6.

18 Ballantyne, ‘Reading the Newspaper’, p.51; Alan Atkinson, ‘“He filled us with laughter”: contact and community in Australian experience’, in Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White, eds, *Cultural History of Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2003, pp.38–51.

19 Cocks, *Classified*, p.ix.

20 Cocks, *Classified*, p.x.

21 Debra Merskin and Mara Huberlie, ‘Companionship in the classifieds: the adoption of personal advertisements by daily newspapers’, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73 (1996), pp.220–1.

22 Merskin and Huberlie, ‘Companionship in the classifieds’, p.219.

23 Thomas Hannaford did attempt to establish a weekly matrimonial journal in the early 1870s. *The Matrimonial Times* was ‘mainly intended to meet the requirements of settlers in out-districts, who are known in innumerable instances to be debarred, from their isolated position, in forming acquaintances with the opposite sex.’ (NZH, 4 October 1871, p.7; *Daily Southern Cross*, 18 November 1872, p.3.) The journal does not appear to have ever been published. Burnett’s Agency (Auckland) did publish a matrimonial circular from 1914 (NZH, 28 November 1914, p.3) at a cost of 1s 1d. It continued to distribute the *Matrimonial Times Circular* until at least 1918 (NZH, 28 October 1918, p.1).

24 Whether agencies matched their clients by first using their own records and then only advertising if they had no one suitable on their books already, or if it was established practice to place advertisements for every new client, is unfortunately not known.

25 Personal profiles placed on online platforms are the present-day evolution of these advertisements.

26 Information on costs were obtained from the classified advertisement sales coupon printed in the *Herald’s* advertising columns. Although advertising rates for the *Auckland Star*, *Evening Post* and *Star/Press* could not be determined, it is reasonable to infer that the rates were comparable.

27 Hayley M. Brown, ‘Loosening The Marriage Bond: Divorce in New Zealand, c. 1890s–c. 1950s’, PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2011, p.121. There were 20 shillings to a pound.

28 Francesca Beauman, *Shapely Ankle Preferr’d: A History of the Lonely Hearts Ad*, Vintage Books, London, 2011, p.37.

29 Charlotte Macdonald, *A Woman of Good Character: Single Women as Immigrant Settlers in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 1990, pp.108, 125.

30 Raewyn Dalziel, 'The colonial helpmeet', in Judith Binney, ed., *The Shaping of History: Essays from the New Zealand Journal of History, 1967–1999*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2001, p.187; Cocks, 'The cost of marriage', p.70. Schemes by the New Zealand government to encourage young single women to migrate to New Zealand were conducted periodically to redress both the population's gender imbalance and the domestic service shortage, culminating in the Empire Settlement Act of 1922. See Katie Pickles, 'Empire Settlement and Single British Women as New Zealand Domestic Servants During the 1920s', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 35, 1 (2001), pp.22–25.

31 *Northern Advocate* (NA), 26 November 1887, p.1. Hannaford may have been inspired by J.S. Coleborne's Natal Agency Matrimonial Scheme, which in 1866 proposed to bring female servants from England to male-dominated colonies for the purpose of marriage. For a description of the scheme see *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle*, 19 June 1866, p.2.

32 *Observer*, 30 January 1886, p.3.

33 Hannaford petition for amendment of Gaming and Lotteries act, 1886, IA 526/[71] 1886/1043, Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

34 Cocks, *Classified*, p.123.

35 Cocks, *Classified*, pp.122–3. A guinea is £1 and 1 shilling (21 shillings).

36 *Press*, 15 March 1897, p.4.

37 NZH, 9 May 1882, p.1.

38 Hannaford petition for amendment of Gaming and Lotteries act, 1886.

39 AS, 10 January 1922, p.1.

40 AS, 8 February 1934, p.1.

41 Inspector Pardy, New Plymouth, to the Commissioner of Armed Constabulary, Wellington, 26 August 1886, P1 197 1886/2932, Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

42 James Monro, London, to Commissioner of Armed Constabulary, Wellington, 29 October 1886, P1 197 1886/2932, Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

43 *Nelson Evening Mail*, 22 March 1897, p.4. Bigamy is an understudied aspect of New Zealand's legal and marital histories. While bigamy in the nineteenth century was frequently overlooked, those unsuspecting women and girls who became second, illegal wives carried the highest degree of both legal and public condemnation. See Raewyn Dalziel, 'The Privileged Crime: Policing and Prosecuting Bigamy in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 51, 2 (2017), pp.1–25.

44 'Unscrupulous Matrimonial Advertiser', *New Zealand Truth* (NZT), 17 June 1911, p.5.

45 'Answering An Ad!' NZT, 28 January 1922, p.5.

46 'Short-lived honeymoon with new "wife"', *Manawatu Times*, 15 May 1916, p.5; 'Bigamy', AS, 30 June 1916, p.6.

47 Wilson was responding to the claims of a Mr Rule of Christchurch who revealed cases of women 'duped and ruined by vicious men' at a lecture to the Presbyterian Society Service Association. These men had advertised for wives: 'Sea of Matrimony and the Advertising Bachelor', *Poverty Bay Herald*, 24 July 1909, p.5; also see 'Matrimonial Advertisements', *Press*, 21 July 1909, p.7.

48 'Crooks Who Advertise For Their Victims', NZT, 14 January 1926, p.4.

49 'The Marriage Market', NZT, 1 December 1927, p.1.

50 Brown, 'Loosening the Marriage Bond', p.121.

51 'Hannaford's Matrimonial Agency', *Observer*, 28 December 1889, p.7.

52 'The matrimonial agency', NZH, 20 February 1903, p.4.

53 Marriage Notice, *Ellesmere Guardian*, 6 February 1895, p.2.

- 54 ‘A champion lover’, AS, 25 March 1926, p.9.
- 55 ‘Marriage market’, AS, 31 March 1928, p.1.
- 56 *Ashburton Guardian*, 1 December 1921, p.2.
- 57 AS, 7 May 1930, p.11.
- 58 Melanie Nolan, *Breadwinning: New Zealand Women and the State*, Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2000, p.189; Barbara Brookes, *A History of New Zealand Women*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2016, p.221.
- 59 Maureen Baker, *Choices and Constraints In Family Life*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, Ontario, 2010, p. 34.
- 60 Greenhalgh, ‘The church as a site of romance’, and her thesis: Charlotte Burgess, ‘Looking to the heart: young people, romance and courtship in interwar New Zealand’, MA thesis, University of Auckland, 2007, p.68. Also see Caroline Daley, *Girls and Women, Men and Boys: Gender in Taradale, 1886–1930*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1999, p.102.
- 61 Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, pp.93, 96; Georgina White, *Light Fantastic: Dance Floor Courtship in New Zealand*, Harper Collins, Auckland, 2007, p.84.
- 62 Letter to the Editor, *Press*, 17 March 1897, p.6.
- 63 NZH, 6 October 1936, p.1; AS, 28 March 1935, p.3; Wendy Goldsmith, Archivist, personal communication, Dunedin, New Zealand, 15 July 2015.
- 64 ‘Bankruptcy case’, NZH, 26 June 1937, p.17. It is possible that this business was a labour or domestic service registry.
- 65 No company or owner’s name was mentioned in any advertisements for 36 Phoenix Chambers, only their address, which has been used as their identifier.
- 66 Ian Pool, Arunachalam Dharmalingam and Janet Sceats, *The New Zealand Family from 1840: A Demographic History*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2007, p.82.
- 67 Cocks, *Classified*, p.ix.
- 68 Deborah Brewster, ‘A decade of the *Woman’s Weekly*, 1932–1942’, BA (Hons) diss., University of Otago, 1980, p.31.
- 69 Erik Olssen, ‘“For Better or Worse”: Marriage Patterns in Dunedin’s Southern Suburbs, 1881–1938’, in Miles Fairburn and Erik Olssen, eds, *Class, Gender and the Vote: Historical Perspectives from New Zealand*, Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2005, p.79; Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914–60*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2010, p.1.
- 70 Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p.13.
- 71 Pool, Dharmalingam, and Sceats, *The New Zealand Family from 1840*, p.98. The number of unmarried women may have resulted from the gender imbalance in New Zealand (more single women than men) or from loss of eligible males due to World War I (either killed or wounded seriously enough to rule out marriage).
- 72 Carolyn Marshall, ed., *In Those Days: A Study of Older Women in Wellington*, Wellington Branch for Research on Women in New Zealand, Wellington, 1982, p.41. This study is, however, somewhat limited as the sample size was extremely small, and the participants were all European women resident in a single urban area (Wellington).
- 73 Marshall, *In Those Days*, p.33.
- 74 Jock Phillips, *A Man’s Country? The Image of The Pakeha Male, A History*, Auckland, 1996, p.238.
- 75 Phillips, *A Man’s Country?*, p.225.
- 76 Phillips, *A Man’s Country?*, p.233; Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p.9.