COVER IMAGE


‘Te Kōpū’ is a collaborative exhibition showcasing the work of Natasha Te Arahori (Ngāti Tūwharetoa and Ngāi Tūhoe), and Bethany Matai Edmunds (Ngāti Kurī). The collaborative works are paintings on upcycled native timber by Keating, and woven adornments by Edmunds, made from flowers and fibres harvested in the bush and the streets of Tāmaki Makaurau. In this exhibition the artists create a space in which atua wāhine — Māori goddesses — are depicted. As wāhine Māori, the artists are challenging the known creation narratives, often authored by non-Māori males, and in so doing creating a safe place from which reflection can take place. The exhibition also acknowledges the political legacy of the women who asserted their right to vote, and is part of the wider celebration of women’s suffrage.

For more on ‘Te Kōpū’ see <http://ondemand.facetv.co.nz/watch.php?vid=8580181a2>.

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The theme for the 2018 Christchurch Beca Heritage Week was ‘Strength from Struggle — Remembering our courageous communities’, with a focus on, amongst other things, the anniversary of women’s suffrage. As soon as the theme was announced, we knew straight away that we wanted to curate an exhibition focused on women. As archaeologists, we are both fascinated by the role of women in the past. Further, through our work in post-earthquake Christchurch we have become very interested in the women who did not quite fit the stereotypes and societal norms of the day — in other words, women who broke the rules. This post-earthquake work has involved archaeological monitoring, excavation and recording on thousands of potential archaeological sites in and around Christchurch as part of demolition, repair and rebuild work in the city. This work has brought to light the stories of the women who are the focus of the exhibition. One of the things that intrigued us about these women was that, once we started looking, they were more common than we had originally thought. And if we, as scholars of the past, were surprised by this, presumably others less familiar with Christchurch’s history would also be, and revealing the depth and diversity of women’s experiences in the past seemed important.

It is generally held that women in the nineteenth century were meant to satisfy the Victorian ideology of domesticity. By the mid-nineteenth century, when home and workplace were often no longer combined in the same space, a stringent division of female and male roles became the ideal, particularly for middle class women. Women were to be confined to the private space, encouraged to be mothers, wives and domestic servants. In contrast, men were supposedly the economic mainstay of the household, active in the ‘real world’ and were much more likely to wield formal power.

These prevailing Victorian stereotypes subsequently came to colour much historical and archaeological research where both disciplines interpreted the past

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1 The events of Beca Heritage Week 2018 are listed on <https://www.ccc.govt.nz/news-and-events/whats-on/>.
through the gaze of the hegemonic middle class, western white male.\textsuperscript{3} The predominant masculine standpoint has focused on men and their achievements for many decades, while women and their activities have gone unnoticed and neglected.\textsuperscript{4} Since the 1980s, a growing body of historical research has focused on the role of women in Aotearoa New Zealand society.\textsuperscript{5} Archaeological studies that look at the role of women in nineteenth-century Aotearoa New Zealand are far fewer.\textsuperscript{6} It would be fair to say that matters have been compounded by the fact that women can be elusive in both the archaeological and the historical record, and this at times complicated our research for the exhibition ‘Women Breaking the Rules’.

As archaeologists, we attempt to learn about people’s lives through the material culture they owned and used. This is rarely an easy matter, and even associating an artefact with a particular gender is not as simple as it might seem. While archaeologists tend to see the archaeological record as less biased than the historical record, being less deliberately curated, it is more the case that the biases are different. While the creation of the archaeological record is not biased by gender, the absence of certain types of artefacts can be telling. For example, one of the women in our exhibition, Elizabeth Robinson, was the first registered female chemist in New Zealand.\textsuperscript{7} No trace of Elizabeth has been found in the

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{berrocal} María Cruz Berrocal, ‘Feminismo, Teoría y Práctica de una Arqueología Científica’, \textit{Trabajos de Prehistoria}, 66, 2 (2009), pp.25–43.
\end{thebibliography}
archaeological record thus far, in spite of the fact that chemists of the day typically bottled their products in their own personally branded bottles. Did Elizabeth choose not to have bottles branded with her name? Did she use only her surname, or her husband’s name? It is possible that Elizabeth chose one of these options to ‘hide’ the fact that she was a woman. Alternatively, it is also possible that we just have not yet found any of her personally branded bottles.

When it comes to historical sources, women can be just as hard to find as in the archaeological record. In newspapers women were typically only referred to as ‘Mrs…’, possibly with the inclusion of an initial, which was often her husband’s rather than her own. Moreover, women simply did not appear in street directories unless they were the head of the household, or ran and advertised a business.\(^8\) Ironically enough, the occasion when someone’s full name was most likely to appear in the newspaper was when they fell foul of the law.

Despite these difficulties, archaeology and history have revealed the lives and activities of six Christchurch women who, in one way or another, broke the rules of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century society. These women are Fanny Cole, prohibitionist; Elizabeth Robinson, chemist; Sarah Gault, dressmaker; Elizabeth Smith, caterer; Caroline Rantin, timber and coal merchant; and Mary Portelli, petty criminal. Regrettably, we have been unable to identify a Māori woman to include in our exhibition — we simply have not been able to find a Māori woman who was living on a site in Christchurch in the mid- to late nineteenth century. We consider here the lives of Sarah Gault and Fanny Cole, women who through the combined techniques of archaeological and historical research may be seen to have ‘broken the rules’ in late nineteenth-century Christchurch.

Fanny Buttery Cole was born in England in 1860 and arrived in New Zealand in 1880.\(^9\) She worked as a teacher at the Brookside and East Oxford schools

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\(^8\) The work of Catherine Bishop has identified the myriad ways in which those women who ran businesses are hidden to historians due to, for example, trading under their husband’s name or simply not advertising their businesses in newspapers. Catherine Bishop, ‘Commerce Was a Woman: Women in Business in Colonial Sydney and Wellington’ (unpublished PhD thesis: Australian National University, 2012), pp.63–71.

until she married Herbert Cole in 1884. Then, Fanny became wife and later, mother of two daughters: Marguerite Lilian and Eleanor Charlotte. By 1893, the Cole family purchased a section on River Road, Christchurch, where they built their house, a typical late nineteenth-century villa. How the archaeology and history revealed Fanny was fascinating. While recording the house and monitoring its demolition, we found a few artefacts in the attic space, including a card with the stamp: ‘W.C.T.U., Christchurch, 129 Manchester Street’. An otherwise trivial piece of paper made this formidable woman visible and her political voice audible. Fanny Cole was a prohibitionist, president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in the 1890s and early 1900s, and a stout activist for women’s rights. As temperance worker, she campaigned against the evils of alcohol and gambling, but also advocated for female prisoners’ rights and the importance of educating young people, among other social matters. Fanny audaciously broke the rules by becoming influential in the public sphere. Fanny pushed forward the confines of female exclusion from politics and formal power. When she died on 25 May 1913, her funeral was attended by numerous local and national politicians. The eulogy delivered by the Reverend Leonard M. Isitt praised her as a public figure, but also for keeping her duties as mistress of her home. Hence, Fanny stands almost between two worlds. She was an example of those women who shaped their lives beyond the boundaries of Victorian society.

Mrs Sarah Gault was an Irish dressmaker who arrived in Lyttelton in April 1883 with her parents and siblings. An Alexander Gault arrived with her, but it is not clear whether he was her husband or her son, and he seems to disappear from the record after this single appearance. By the time Sarah appears in the street directories (1887), she is clearly the head of the household and there is no

11 Fanny Cole signed the 1893 suffrage petition. The Women’s Suffrage Petition Te Petihana Whakamana Pōti Wahine 1893, pp.61, 65.
13 ‘Death of Mrs Cole’, Northern Advocate, 26 May 1913, p.3.
14 ‘The Late Mrs H. Cole’, Star, 29 May 1913, p.4.
Within a year of arrival Sarah had set herself up as a dressmaker and, by September 1885 was renting the house in Gloucester Street, Christchurch, that brought her to our attention. It is almost completely certain that Sarah was running her business from her house, as she would do later in the decade and as was common practice for dressmakers at the time. Running a business from home meant that a woman could look after the home at the same time, particularly if there were children to take care of — no evidence has been found to suggest that Sarah had children, although the possibility cannot be discounted. The house that Sarah rented in 1885 was a small, perfectly respectable bay villa just on the outskirts of central Christchurch. Not only was Sarah almost certainly operating her business from this house, it is also possible that her elderly parents were living with her, as they were when they died in 1890 and 1900. Sarah’s business was both large enough and successful enough for her to take on apprentices and improvers. The house is likely to have been busy and full, particularly with Sarah’s customers coming and going.

Sarah broke the rules in a number of ways: by living without her husband (although she may have been a widow), by running a business (albeit one that was socially acceptable for a working or lower middle class woman to run) and also quite literally when she was charged (more than once) with breaching employment laws. So, what does her house — through the methods of buildings archaeology — tell us about her rule breaking? In almost all respects this house, built in c.1883, was the model middle class house, with its fan and sidelights around the front door, its rusticated weatherboards, a neatly decorative bay window, decorative bargeboards, finial, ceiling roses, hall arch...
and plinth blocks on the door architraves. These decorative features, too, meant that it was just a little bit fancier than a working class house. There was one thing that distinguished it from the middle class bay villa: its size. It was all just a little bit smaller than its middle class equivalent, as exemplified by the fact that it had pairs of sash windows, rather than triples. All of this suggests that Sarah had deliberately rented a house that would appeal to the style and tastes of the middle class customers she no doubt hoped to attract, customers who would hopefully spend a little bit more on their dresses than working class women might. The nature of the house may have also spoken to the nature of the respectable dresses that Sarah might have made for her customers.

Even though Fanny Cole and Sarah Gault ‘broke the rules’, their lives were still circumscribed by both societal standards and economic pressures — Sarah ran a business that fitted within the norms of what was expected for a woman in the Victorian era, while Fanny maintained an image as a mother, wife and dutiful mistress of her home. Like the other women in our exhibition, and so many women in nineteenth-century New Zealand, they pushed the boundaries of what was accepted and respectable, whilst working within the confines of that society. By slowly pushing these boundaries, women would come to change society as a whole.

Katharine Watson is a PhD student at the University of Canterbury, where she is studying how Christchurch’s nineteenth century residents used houses to ‘get on’ in the world.

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