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**‘Novels are not Nonsense’: 1920s and 1930s  
New Zealand reflected through the Fiction of  
Jean Devanny and John A. Lee.**

**A Thesis  
submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the Degree  
of  
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## Abstract

John Mulgan's *Man Alone* (1939) has often been considered by historians and literary scholars as 'the fullest prose rendering of what the New Zealand twenties and thirties felt like.'<sup>1</sup> This thesis argues that other contemporary novels, specifically those of Jean Devanny (1894 – 1962) and John A. Lee (1891 – 1982), present equally rich sources of information for historians researching early twentieth century New Zealand. Devanny and Lee both wrote novels set in a contemporary context, all of which offer critiques relevant to aspects of New Zealand society. These works often draw on and comment on entrenched understandings of gender, class and race, and thus provide a nuanced and sophisticated picture of 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. In this sense, the novels enable meaningful insights into contemporary issues. As Devanny asserts, they are by no means 'nonsense', but highly valuable and useful considerations relevant to contemporary lives and issues.<sup>2</sup> This thesis stresses that the contradictions and intricacies found in the novels of these two authors, Devanny's in particular, should be utilised by historians as they reflect on various issues in early twentieth century New Zealand. Indeed, what might they say about New Zealanders' understandings of their national history if Devanny's *The Butcher Shop* (1926) or Lee's *Children of the Poor* (1934) was regarded by historians as the quintessential novel of the 1920s and 1930s instead of *Man Alone*?

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Stevens, *The New Zealand Novel 1860-1965* (Auckland: Reed Publishing (NZ), 1966), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Devanny, *Poor Swine* (London: Duckworth, 1932), p. 76.

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## **Introduction: All Novels are not Nonsense.**<sup>1</sup>

Lenore began to write. [...] She had pondered long over the subject-matter of her book. Her capacity to make good she never doubted; she felt herself able to produce something really big, a book instinct with the germs of progress, vital to achieve, a real fighting force for the good of the race.

Jean Devanny, *Lenore Divine*<sup>2</sup>

One of the prominent ‘myths’ of New Zealand’s national identity is the much celebrated notion of ‘equality’, particularly in terms of class, gender, and race.<sup>3</sup>

The roots of this national myth stretch back to early Pākehā settlement, and were reinforced through the nineteenth century by various events such as the passing of the *Māori Representation Act* of 1867, the introduction of universal male suffrage in 1879, the election of the Liberal Government in 1891, and the granting of female suffrage in 1893.<sup>4</sup> This myth remained dominant within historical, literary and sociological discourses during the 1920s and 1930s. Historians began to steadily deconstruct this myth in the late twentieth century, but significantly, authors publishing in the 1920s and 1930s sought to challenge various aspects of supposed social equality, particularly in a growing body of home grown fiction.

This writing can be explored the novels of Jane Mander, Jean Devanny, John A.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Devanny, *Poor Swine* (London: Duckworth, 1932), p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, ed. by Kirstine Moffat (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> In this thesis ‘myth’ refers to a set of cultural assumptions that have been used to construct a particular understanding of New Zealand’s national identity. In regard to race, the myth is associated with equality between Māori and Pākehā. Chinese, in particular, were openly treated as unequal during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For further discussion on anti-Chinese prejudice in New Zealand see ‘’, in *Unfolding History, Evolving Identity: The Chinese in New Zealand*, ed. by Manying Ip (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003); Nigel Murphy, ‘Jo Lum v. The Attorney General: The Politics of Exclusion’, in *Unfolding History, Evolving Identity: The Chinese in New Zealand*, ed. by Manying Ip (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Māori Representation Act of 1867 and male suffrage see Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 191 – 258. For further information on the Liberal Government elected in 1891 refer to Keith Sinclair, *The Liberal Government, 1891-1912: First Steps Towards a Welfare State* (Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books, 1967). And for more information on female suffrage refer to Judith Devaliant, *Kate Sheppard: The Fight for Women’s Votes in New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1992).

Lee, and Robin Hyde, as well as the short stories of Frank Sargeson and the poetry of A. R. D. Fairburn and Denis Glover.<sup>5</sup> Despite this body of writing, historians have tended to focus more on John Mulgan's 1939 novel, *Man Alone*.

*Man Alone* has been described as 'the fullest prose rendering of what the New Zealand twenties and thirties felt like'.<sup>6</sup> This thesis challenges this assumption and contends that the New Zealand novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee are equally rich sources of information relevant to 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. The fiction of these two authors articulates contemporary understandings of and debates surrounding gender, class, race, religion and 'the demon drink' and provides a complex and nuanced insight into the period.<sup>7</sup>

Jean Devanny (1894 – 1962) was a feminist, self-proclaimed communist, and a novelist who wrote seven works of New Zealand fiction in the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Devanny novels are critical her contemporary context, particularly challenging traditional feminine stereotypes and questioning the supposed equality between the genders. In addition, Devanny regularly protested against class distinctions and racial prejudice in early twentieth century New Zealand. She was also fearless advocate of sexual and religious freedom and an outspoken critic of alcohol abuse. Like Devanny, John A. Lee was also critical of contemporary society. He shared both Devanny's anti-puritan stance and somewhat contradictory temperance inclinations and, like his literary contemporary, and vehemently protested against class inequality in three of his

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on the social critiques present in these works refer to Chapter One of this thesis or see Lawrence Jones, 'The Novel', in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, ed. by Terry Sturm, 2nd edn (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 119 – 244.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Stevens, *The New Zealand Novel 1860-1965* (Auckland: Reed Publishing (NZ), 1966), p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> 'The demon drink' was a popular phrase used by those involved in the prohibition movement in the early twentieth century. See 'The Vilest Fiend of All', *Auckland Star*, 15 December 1919, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on Devanny see her biography Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1999).

novels published in the 1930s. Lee was an influential left-wing politician and parliamentarian.<sup>9</sup> His interest in socialism, much like Devanny's, had a significant impact on his writing. The novels of both Devanny and Lee are full of contradictions and complexities. They offer historians multiple windows through which to examine the nuances of early twentieth century New Zealand. This thesis contends that the fiction of Devanny and Lee is especially rich with examples and commentaries drawn directly from the period, and has been under-utilised by historians.

Relying heavily on fiction as primary evidence has been considered problematic by a number of empirical scholars.<sup>10</sup> With the emergence of post-structural theory in the 1980s the supposedly blurred line between history and fiction was specifically highlighted.<sup>11</sup> Driven by an increased awareness of the problematic nature of source materials fictional literature became more accepted as a historical source.<sup>12</sup> This was certainly not a new idea. Writing in the eighteenth century, philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder argued that through:

poetry's gallery of diverse ways of thinking, diverse aspirations, and diverse desires, we come to know periods and nations far more intimately [...], we learn about [a period's] way of thinking, its desires and wants, the ways it rejoiced, and the ways it was guided either by its principles or its inclinations.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on Lee refer to his biography Erik Olssen, *John A. Lee* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> For more on narrative, fiction and history as well as post-structuralism see *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-century History and Theory*, ed. by Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 204 – 228, 297 – 325. Also see Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Southgate, p. 8. Some post-structuralist scholars posit that all sources are influenced by the perception of the producer and, thus, reflect narratives fractured by individual views rather than a universal truth.

<sup>13</sup> *Practicing New Historicism*, ed. by Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 6 – 7.



Influenced by post-structuralist and literary theories, historians, by the 1980s, had developed a greater appreciation of the value of sources outside of the traditional archive, turning to oral histories and cultural artefacts to examine the way historical subjects understood and engaged with their world.<sup>14</sup> As literary scholar, and oral historian Alessandro Portelli argues, texts ‘are both highly individual expressions and manifestations of social discourse, made up of socially defined and shared discursive structures.’<sup>15</sup>

As historians began to embrace cultural artefacts and contemporary narratives as a way of exploring the nuances of an era, new forms of historical analysis developed. One such method, borrowed from literary studies, is new historicism. New historicism posits the idea that a text or an object is reflective of the distinct culture in which it was produced. Indeed, the language and symbols used within it are determined by the social attitudes and discourses of the period.<sup>16</sup> Thus, literature can be read as a reflection of a number of aspects of the historical context in which it was produced. Beverley Southgate notes that a society’s literature is able to give the historian insight into the ‘widely accepted social mores and intellectual presuppositions’ present within the period the work was produced.<sup>17</sup> In recent years, the use of literature, especially fiction, as historical evidence has been more readily employed by a variety of historians.<sup>18</sup>

An increasing range of New Zealand historians have embraced the use of fiction as a historical source. Jock Phillips, for instance, in his book *A Man’s*

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<sup>14</sup> For more on oral history see Green and Troup, pp. 230 – 252. For more information on the use of cultural artefacts see Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 82.

<sup>16</sup> John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Transitions, 1998), pp. 3 – 5. While, I do not fully engage with a new historicist interpretation of literary texts given the very structuralist nature of this theory which does not allow for a large degree of individual agency, I believe it is useful as an analytical tool.

<sup>17</sup> Southgate, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Southgate, p. 8.

*Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male - A History*, explores the construction of Pākehā masculinity with reference to the novels of Jane Mander, John Mulgan and John A. Lee.<sup>19</sup> Lydia Bloy also contends that fictional literature allows historians a way into understanding how people in the past perceived their social world.<sup>20</sup> Bloy uses John A. Lee's 1934 novel *Children of the Poor* to problematize the work of Margaret Galt, who claims that New Zealand was largely an egalitarian society between 1870 and 1939.<sup>21</sup> Recently, Christopher Burke has explored how fictional narratives found in New Zealand novels and short stories engage with understandings of the queer male identity.<sup>22</sup>

The use of fiction as a key source of primary historical evidence within this thesis follows a form of already established approaches to historical research and analysis. This thesis contends that the novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee offer more expansive frameworks through which to interpret 1920s and 1930s New Zealand culture and society. They reveal a number of nuances and complexities not highlighted in conventional historical sources.

More recently, cultural historians have argued that the heavily focus that scholars have placed on literature has led to the neglect of other cultural artefacts and as a result new cultural and social histories should focus less on literature.<sup>23</sup> In his discussion on the cultural history of New Zealand and the frameworks used to view culture, Chris Hilliard has argued that in the past New Zealand cultural historians have viewed 'letters and art' as offering 'special interpretative access to

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<sup>19</sup> Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male - A History*, Revised (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Lydia Bloy, "'Class' in the Eye of the Beholder in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand Society', in *Class, Gender and the Vote: Historical Perspectives from New Zealand*, ed. by Miles Fairburn and Erik Olssen (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2005), pp. 175 – 191 (p. 176).

<sup>21</sup> Bloy, p. 182.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Burke, 'Diversity or Perversity? Investigating Queer Narratives, Resistance, and Representation in Aotearoa / New Zealand, 1948-2000' (unpublished MA, University of Waikato, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> For more see Peter Burke.

the national culture.’<sup>24</sup> Hilliard suggests that cultural history focussed around this idea of high culture is ultimately restricting and that cultural historians ought to explore a wider range of artefacts.<sup>25</sup> This has some merit, yet the novels of Devanny and Lee explicitly engage with these very issues of high society and culture.

Devanny and Lee’s novels have largely been neglected by historians. This thesis proposes that these novels should be considered more closely in historical scholarship. They reflect a variety of contemporary discourses surrounding issues of gender, class and race that, the authors believed, existed in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. Devanny and Lee’s fiction challenged dominant contemporary narratives about equality well before historians began to deconstruct these in the 1970s.

In early twentieth century New Zealand, a number of discourses emphasised the existence of social equality. Given New Zealand’s unique natural landscape, distance from Europe, and late Pākehā settlement, the country was advertised in the nineteenth century as an ‘Arcadian paradise’, free of the social problems that existed in the ‘Old World.’<sup>26</sup> New Zealand utopian myths were forged around specific notions of classlessness, political radicalism, and equality between genders and races.<sup>27</sup> William Pember Reeves’ 1898 poem ‘New Zealand’, for instance, is an apt reference for just how well entrenched the notion of class and gender equality was to those in late nineteenth century New Zealand. He writes:

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<sup>24</sup> Chris Hilliard, ‘Colonial Culture and Province of Cultural History’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 36 (2002), 82 – 97 (p. 82).

<sup>25</sup> Hilliard, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> Dominic Alessio, ‘Promoting Paradise: Utopianism and National Identity in New Zealand, 1870 - 1930’, *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 42 (2008), 22 – 41 (pp. 23 – 26).

<sup>27</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, ‘Utopianism and the Creation of New Zealand National Identity’, *Utopian Studies*, 12 (2001), 1– 18; Alessio.

Though young they are heirs of the ages,  
Though few they are freemen and peers,  
Plain workers – yet sure of the wages  
Slow Destiny pays with the years.  
Though least they and latest their nation,  
Yet this they have won without sword,  
That Woman with Man shall have station,  
And Labour be lord.<sup>28</sup>

These sentiments appeared in various forms, from the poem to official documents such as *The Immigrant's Prospects in New Zealand*, produced in 1853, which read: 'New Zealand has justly been called the poor man's paradise. It is a blessed thing to think that the poor working man can find a paradise somewhere.'<sup>29</sup> Equality remained a powerful ideological refrain in the late nineteenth century and a dominant narrative of not only the colony's settler history, but its march towards national maturity. It is unsurprising that directly after this period Thomas Bracken described New Zealand as 'God's Own Country' in his 1890 poem, a phrase popularised by Richard Seddon later that same decade.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the obvious promotional purposes, egalitarian myths came to be drawn upon by a variety of contemporaries, and were regularly used to celebrate national identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The local representation of New Zealand as a progressive 'egalitarian' society and 'social laboratory' in the early twentieth century has become an important chapter in the nation's story. Indeed, this has been the overarching narrative presented in a number of New Zealand histories.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the 1920s and 1930s, has often been

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<sup>28</sup> William Pember Reeves, *New Zealand, and Other Poems* (London: Grant Richards, 1898), pp. 2 – 3.

<sup>29</sup> Sargent, 'Utopianism and the Creation of New Zealand National Identity', p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> W. S. Broughton, 'Bracken, Thomas - Biography', *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2012 <<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2b35/1>> [accessed 5 January 2013].

<sup>31</sup> For example Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand, Revised Edition* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1969); James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland: The Penguin Press, 2001); Erik Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', in

depicted as the period in which New Zealanders ‘found’ themselves, affirmed and entrenched significant social values in their national DNA, and in the process established a national culture.

One of the more influential histories that portrays the 1920s and 1930s as a time of important social progression is Keith Sinclair’s *A History of New Zealand*.<sup>32</sup> Sinclair’s reflection of the 1920s asserts that this was a time for political and economic experimentation that laid the foundations for wider social advancement in the mid-1930s. Sinclair argues that the 1930s was the period in which New Zealanders started to see themselves as a nation, distinctly separate from Britain. He quotes contemporary author Robin Hyde to emphasise this point: ‘we loved England still, but we ceased to be “for ever England”. We became, for as long as we have a country, New Zealand.’<sup>33</sup> For Sinclair, the election of the first Labour Government in 1935 heralded the coming of age of a new socially conscious and humanitarian society. Socialist policies, particularly the increase of state control in the banking, medical, and educational sectors are emphasised by Sinclair to illustrate just how rapid the nation was advancing. Similarly, increasing equality, particularly between classes, is noted in Sinclair’s progressive narrative.<sup>34</sup> Sinclair’s history also contends that, by 1940, ‘the islands [New Zealand] had been transformed from a rugged wilderness to one of the most productive parts of the world.’<sup>35</sup> This depiction of 1920s and 1930s New Zealand

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*The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Rice, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 254 – 284; King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand; Frontier of Dreams: The Story of New Zealand*, ed. by Bronwyn Dalley and Gavin McLean (Auckland: Hodder Moe, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand, Revised Edition*.

<sup>33</sup> Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand, Revised Edition*, p. 281. An idea strongly disputed by later historians, particularly Peter Gibbons.

<sup>34</sup> Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand, Revised Edition*, pp. 275 – 276.

<sup>35</sup> Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand, Revised Edition*, p. 278.

found regular purchase in later national histories, and became a key chapter in New Zealand nation making well into the 1980s and beyond.<sup>36</sup>

Like Sinclair, Erik Olssen has also highlighted the 1920s and 1930s as a time of significant national development.<sup>37</sup> For Olssen, the period between 1890 and 1940 constituted New Zealand's most significant phase in the country's movement towards modernization and essentially a 'new society'.<sup>38</sup> He argues that by the 1920s, society was shifting 'from pre-industrial to industrial, from pre-modern to modern' based upon increasing urbanisation, developing technology and growing social organisation.<sup>39</sup> The increased rights of women are also addressed by Olssen' as a key point of reference in social progression of the period.<sup>40</sup> In keeping with the pre-dominant notion in New Zealand national histories, Olssen argues that the election of the first Labour Government greatly improved the lives of many New Zealanders with the establishment of social welfare policies and the increasing emphasis on health care and education.<sup>41</sup>

Most historians have tended to note that the election of the Labour government in 1935 signalled a type of national maturing reflected in policies based on social improvement.<sup>42</sup> These views remain consistent in the historical literature, and are well documented in James Belich's *Paradise Reforged* (2001), Michael King's *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (2003) and Bronwyn

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<sup>36</sup> For examples refer to *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Rice, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society'.

<sup>38</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 254.

<sup>39</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', pp. 254 – 258.

<sup>40</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 264

<sup>41</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 283.

<sup>42</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 283. It is important to note that Olssen suggests this modernization of New Zealand society partially grew out of the social conditions surrounding the Great Depression.

Dalley's and Gavin McLean's *Frontier of Dreams* (2005).<sup>43</sup> Similar to Sinclair, these histories reinforce a narrative of national progress, in which the 1920s and 1930s play a specific part. For Belich, improvements to the quality of art and literature support the development of a distinct national culture and therefore a nation developing towards maturity in this period.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, King's treatment of the supposed equalling of relations between Māori and Pākehā suggests that on a social, as well as political, level, New Zealand was advancing towards a liberal and modern nation in the opening decades of the twentieth century.<sup>45</sup>

For some time now, historical scholarship in New Zealand has vigorously challenged the narrow egalitarian myth that arose late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Olssen, Belich, King, Dalley and McLead's histories have all problematized this myth to varying degrees. A number of more specifically focussed New Zealand histories have continued to challenge the myth of equality by engaging with, and further problematizing, the narrative of social progression constructed in Sinclair, Belich, King's national histories.

In *Fragments: New Zealand Social and Cultural History*, Bronwyn Dalley investigates complex public discourses present in the 1920s media relevant to the coverage of the death of Elsie Walker in 1928.<sup>46</sup> Dalley highlights an array of emergent contemporary attitudes and social understandings at play in the late 1920s, particularly in regard to social taboos.<sup>47</sup> In analysing, and picking apart,

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<sup>43</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 327; King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, p. 343; Neill Atkinson, 'The Rise and Fall of Happy Homes, 1918 - 1935', in *Frontier of Dreams: The Story of New Zealand*, ed. by Bronwyn Dalley and Gavin McLean (Auckland: Hodder Moe, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 327.

<sup>45</sup> King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, p. 342.

<sup>46</sup> Bronwyn Dalley, 'The Cultural Remains of Elsie Walker', in *Fragments: New Zealand Social and Cultural History*, ed. by Bronwyn Dalley and Bronwyn Labrum (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2000), pp. 140 – 162.

<sup>47</sup> Dalley, 'The Cultural Remains of Elsie Walker', p. 155.

narratives published in the media, Dalley explores the complexity of discourses surrounding suspicious deaths.

Other historians have explored the intricacies of life in the 1920s and 1930s through frameworks of gender, class and race. For instance, in ‘Housewives’ Depression: The Debate over Abortion and Birth Control in the 1930s’, Barbara Brookes explores the complexities of gender relations in New Zealand society during the interwar years.<sup>48</sup> Brookes shows how government policy and medical institutions interacted with ideas around birth control and abortion. She notes that socially restrictive attitudes concerning gender, particularly the ‘maternal role’ women were expected to conform to, informed the way in which the government and individuals engaged with issues surrounding birth control and abortion.<sup>49</sup> Brookes demonstrates that assumptions about female identity reinforced the role of women as the wife and mother despite contemporary claims that New Zealand women were becoming increasingly equal to men.<sup>50</sup>

Likewise, Caroline Daley and Tim Frank address gender issues during this period in their respective chapters in *The Gendered Kiwi*.<sup>51</sup> Daley looks at the expectations attached to male and female leisure and sports from 1890 through to 1940 with a specific focus on the Auckland Domain. She argues that men and women were often required to ‘perform to a gendered script’ through their

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<sup>48</sup> Barbara Brookes, ‘Housewives’ Depression: The Debate over Abortion and Birth Control in the 1930s’, in *The Shaping of History: Essays from New Zealand Journal of History*, ed. by Judith Binney (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2001), pp. 196 – 210.

<sup>49</sup> Brookes, p. 209.

<sup>50</sup> Brookes uses a great many more sources but I am particularly interested in how she goes about reading ‘against the grain.’

<sup>51</sup> Caroline Daley, ‘A Gendered Domain: Leisure in Auckland, 1890 – 1940’, in *The Gendered Kiwi*, ed. by Caroline Daley and Deborah Montgomerie (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1999), pp. 87 – 112; Tim Frank, ‘Bread Queues and Breadwinners: Gender in the 1930s’, in *The Gendered Kiwi*, Ed. by Caroline Daley and Deborah Montgomerie (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1999).’, in *The Gendered Kiwi*, ed. by Caroline Daley and Deborah Montgomerie (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1999).



interactions in this space.<sup>52</sup> Frank examines attitudes to the male breadwinning ideology in the 1930s. His chapter discusses the ‘gender-loaded expectations’ of the 1935 Labour government in relation to the creation of welfare policies, demonstrating that these centred on the notion that males were the breadwinners.<sup>53</sup> Like Brookes’ argument on abortion and birth control, Frank’s work demonstrates that, despite the general belief that New Zealand society was becoming increasingly socially advanced because of the increased equality between women and men, there were still very distinct gender roles in New Zealand society.<sup>54</sup> Both Daley and Frank’s chapters illustrate the highly fraught and complex nature of gender relations in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>55</sup>

Ranginui Walker’s indigenous perspective in *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou* (2004), has also challenged equality narratives present in New Zealand historical scholarship.<sup>56</sup> Walker’s discussion of 1920s and 1930s society asserts that there was no increase in equality between Māori and Pākehā in this period, but a continuation of colonisation.

Further insights relevant to early twentieth century New Zealand are found in a variety of histories that challenge the entrenched assumption that New Zealand was a classless society in this era. Lydia Bloy examines the way in which those living in the early twentieth century regarded class and class distinctions through the use of fictional literature and newspaper reports.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, Erik Olssen, Clyde Griffen and Frank Jones investigate the realities of

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<sup>52</sup> Daley, p. 103.

<sup>53</sup> Frank, p. 115.

<sup>54</sup> Frank, pp. 130 – 132.

<sup>55</sup> Daley further explores the nuances surrounding gender roles in this period in her micro-history of Taradale, *Girls & Women, Men & Boys: Gender in Taradale 1886 – 1930*. Caroline Daley, *Girls & Women, Men & Boys: Gender in Taradale 1886 - 1930* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Mātou: Struggle Without End* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> Bloy.

social mobility and class in Dunedin between 1880 and 1940 through statistical evidence and the perspectives of those living in Dunedin during this period in their book *An Accidental Utopia? Social Mobility and the Foundations of an Egalitarian Society, 1880 – 1940* (2011).<sup>58</sup>

These histories engage with, and problematize, the myth of national progression and particularly challenge the myth of social equality. This thesis makes reference to these historians and offers further insight through which to consider early twentieth New Zealand history in the writing of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee. It seeks to evoke ‘the fabric of life in the past’ in all its richness through an exploration of the nuances of New Zealand society revealed in the ‘New Zealand novels’ of these.<sup>59</sup>

On the surface the terms ‘New Zealand novels’ and ‘New Zealand authors’ may sound relatively straight forward. However, within early twentieth century literature these terms are somewhat problematic. The New Zealand literary scene of the 1920s and 1930s was not encouraging for those writing in New Zealand.<sup>60</sup> The majority of authors tended to be expatriates, either living and writing overseas, or as Belich terms them, ‘unhappy internal expatriates’; those writers still living in New Zealand but who became culturally isolated.<sup>61</sup> The strong connections between British literary traditions, radical British and American writers of the 1920s and 1930s, international political and intellectual ideas and New Zealand fiction also raises several issues about the notion of a national

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<sup>58</sup> Erik Olssen, Clyde Griffen and Frank Jones, *An Accidental Utopia? Social Mobility and the Foundations of an Egalitarian Society, 1880 - 1940* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> *Fragments: New Zealand Social and Cultural History*, ed. by Bronwyn Dalley and Bronwyn Labrum (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Belich makes the argument that writers of New Zealand fiction were more successful before the turn of the century inasmuch as more work was published and read within the country despite the lack of quality. Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 327.

<sup>61</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 332.

fiction.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, in this study the ‘New Zealand novel’ is defined as fiction written by New Zealand authors set in a New Zealand context.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, New Zealand authors are defined as writers who were born in New Zealand and lived in the country for an extended period of time. The novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee examined within this thesis are considered ‘New Zealand’ fiction because they deal with social issues in a New Zealand setting and are written by New Zealand authors, despite the majority of having been published overseas.

Chapter One of this thesis considers the ways in which Devanny and Lee novels have been addressed in literary criticism and historical scholarship. By situating these novels in their literary context, the chapter highlights a number of factors that have caused Mulgan’s *Man Alone* to be regarded as the quintessential novel of the interwar years, while Devanny and Lee’s novels have remained on the periphery. After this discussion, the chapter turns to an examination of the Devanny and Lee’s construction of character. Both authors use their characters to highlight their social criticisms. Indeed, such is the polemical nature of their fiction that some of their characters have a primary purpose of embodying either a cause Devanny and Lee are advocating or a social defect that their texts are critiquing. An understanding of characterisation in these novels fundamental to

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<sup>62</sup> Recent historians have pointed to the importance of transnational histories. For example, Peter Gibbons, ‘The Far Side of the Search for Identity: Reconsidering New Zealand History’, *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 37 (2003), 38 – 49; Jock Phillips, ‘Of Verandahs and Fish and Chips and Footie on Saturday Afternoon: Reflections on 100 Years of New Zealand Historiography’, in *The Shaping of History: Essays from New Zealand Journal of History*, ed. by Judith Binney (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2001), pp. 320 – 336. As Peter Gibbons notes ‘these seas about these islands are not barriers: they are highways’ which connect New Zealand to the rest of the world. Kirstine Moffat, *Piano Forte: Stories and Soundscapes from Colonial New Zealand* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2011), p. 19. New Zealand literature has been particularly influenced by international literary trends. Kai Jensen, *Whole Men: The Masculine Tradition in New Zealand Literature* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1996), p. 169; Lawrence Jones, p. 161. Thus, the novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee have relevance in a wider historical context. However, given the scope of this thesis, the novels of these two authors are only addressed within a national context.

<sup>63</sup> For more on the definition of ‘New Zealand literature’ see ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, 2nd edn (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. ix – xix (pp. xi – xiii).

analysing the attitudes towards twentieth century New Zealand reflected within them.

Chapter Two investigates how a number of contemporary attitudes surrounding gender, in particular the role of women in society, are revealed in the novels of Devanny and Lee. Devanny's fiction attacks the expectations placed on women that force them to conform to the role of the wife and mother. While Lee does not directly address the role of women in his novels, his fiction does reflect the contemporary emphasis placed on the link between female identity and the domestic sphere. Through exploring the way the novels of these two authors engage with understandings of gender this chapter aims to reveal some of the complex attitudes and assumptions surrounding gender roles in the early twentieth century.

In Chapter Three a number of contemporary Pākehā attitudes towards Māori found in the novels of Devanny are examined. The chapter explores how Devanny's use of Māori characters challenged aspects of this myth of good race relations from within the period itself. It then turns to look at how, despite her radicalism, Devanny's novels still draw on a number of cultural assumptions about Māori. Thus, the chapter contends that Devanny's fiction engages with contemporary racial tensions in a way that allows historians to further explore the complexities surrounding race relations in early twentieth century New Zealand.

The complexities and contradictions present in the 1920s and 1930s are further examined within Chapter Four through the way in which Devanny and Lee wrote about class. Given that both authors addressed what they believed to be significant contemporary issues through a socialist lens, their novels depict distinct class differences as a form of social protest. This chapter addresses how

Devanny and Lee represented social classes and what this reveals to the historian about how people living in the 1920s and 1930s considered social distinctions. Because the novels are critical of dominant discourses of the period they offer an alternative perspective on contemporary understandings of class and, therefore, highlight the nuances of lived realities in the early twentieth century.

Chapter Five reinforces the dangers to historians (and novelists, social commentators, or any other thinkers and writers) of describing the past in simple binaries. The chapter posits the idea that when it comes to issues of morality Devanny and Lee can perhaps best be described as ‘agnostic wowsers’. Both authors were highly critical of religious and secular puritanism. In many ways their novels question the belief practices of early twentieth century New Zealand Christians and the agendas of social purity campaigners. Yet, Lee and Devanny are also both ardently against alcohol consumption. Therefore, by critiquing organised religion *and* alcohol consumption these two authors’ novels present a challenge to simple dichotomies.

The novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee are valuable to historians as these works provide a contemporary commentary on a variety of social issues present in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. By offering alternative perspectives on insider understandings of society, these novels further complicate and problematize historians’ interpretations of this era, thus helping to develop a nuanced and vivid picture of life in early twentieth century New Zealand.

## Chapter One:

### The 'Lurid' Fiction of Devanny and 'Raw' Novels of John A. Lee<sup>1</sup>

'If you like, of course, you can dismiss the matter summarily by pointing out that London is the only place where good books in English are mass produced, and, the supply of a commodity being governed by the demand for it, New Zealanders with literary talent either go to London and make some sort of a living there or else stay at home, enjoy the sunshine and banish high ambition for ever. But I am not so sure. I feel that there is more in it than that.'

*Auckland Star*, 22 February 1936<sup>2</sup>

This thesis asserts that the New Zealand novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee are valuable sources of information for historians interested in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. To appreciate the social critique within the novels it is important to understand where they are situated in the history of New Zealand literature. This chapter addresses the literary context in which Devanny and Lee's novels were produced, and discusses how these novels have been regarded by contemporary and recent literary critics and historians. Literary scholars writing in the mid-twentieth century have generally argued that, until the emergence of the *Phoenix* generation in the late 1930s, New Zealand lacked what can be termed a 'national' literature.<sup>3</sup> Authors publishing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as Devanny and Lee, have frequently been overlooked and even dismissed within this scholarly tradition. This chapter examines why Devanny's fiction has

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<sup>1</sup> E. H. McCormick referred to Devanny's fiction as 'lurid' in his 1940 publication *Letters and Art in New Zealand*. E. H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs New Zealand, 1940), p. 148. Writing in 1990, literary critic, Patrick Evans, referred to Lee's novels as 'crude'. Patrick Evans, *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> 'Art in Exile', *Auckland Star*, 22 February 1936, p. 8. While the writer of this report is largely concerned with arguments surrounding why good quality New Zealand authors leave New Zealand before producing their best works, the above quote suits the way more recent literary scholars have considered early twentieth century novels.

<sup>3</sup> For example see 'Art in Exile', *AS*, 22 February 1936, p. 8. The term 'Phoenix generation' was taken from Patrick Evans' *The Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* and refers to those writers associated with the Auckland Journal *Phoenix*, and the *Tomorrow* periodical and Caxton Press in Christchurch. Writers include D'Arcy Cresswell, R. A. K. Mason, Robin Hyde, Allen Curnow, A. R. D. Fairburn, Charles Brasch, Denis Glover and John Mulgan (although Mulgan did not contribute to either of the two periodicals, his writing style placed him within this group). Evans, p. 76.

often been regarded as ‘lurid’ and Lee’s prose as ‘old fashion’ and ‘raw’ within literary criticism.<sup>4</sup> It also examines how literary criticism influenced the way in which these two authors have been discussed in historical scholarship. This is followed by a brief analysis of the use of characterisation by both authors. Understanding how Devanny and Lee use characters to advance their social commentary is critical to a thorough analysis of their novels.

The novels of John A. Lee and Jean Devanny fall within a tradition of social criticism present within New Zealand literature by the 1920s. Often the New Zealand novel of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century has been considered by literary scholars as a reflection of a romantic understanding of society linked to imagined equality or as an expression of settler idealism.<sup>5</sup> Where social criticism is present within early twentieth century novels it has tended to be regarded as focussed on aspects of society that the author believed would be overcome as New Zealand moved towards a modern nation.<sup>6</sup> The literature associated with a more critical take on society has often been attributed to those writers publishing in the late 1930s through to the middle of the twentieth century, predominantly Frank Sargeson (1903 – 1982), Robin Hyde (1906 – 1939) and John Mulgan (1911 – 1945). Recent scholarship has offered new perspectives on the understanding of the history of New Zealand literature, arguing that alongside the ‘Pastoral Paradise’ and utopian based fiction there existed a

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<sup>4</sup> McCormick, p. 148; Evans, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Jones, ‘The Novel’, in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, ed. by Terry Sturm, 2nd edn (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 119 – 244.

<sup>6</sup> Thus, rather than presenting a critique similar to the writers publishing in the late 1930s, those writing in the early twentieth century are depicted as supporting the Just City ideal. The Just City is a term used by Lawrence Jones, see Lawrence Jones, *Picking Up the Traces: The Making of a New Zealand Literary Culture 1932 – 1945* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003).

tradition of social criticism.<sup>7</sup> The novels of Lee and Devanny's fall within this tradition. Novels containing social criticism offer historians a window through which to study and analyse not only the cultural aspects, but the political and social issues of the period in which they were written.<sup>8</sup> Thus, this thesis contends that the fiction produced by Devanny and Lee is extremely valuable to historians interested in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand, particularly given the rich social critique found within these authors' novels.<sup>9</sup> For historians to appreciate how Devanny and Lee's fiction offers insights into the nuances of life in New Zealand during this era it is important to understand where these two writers sat in the history of New Zealand literature. To assume that Lee and Devanny wrote from an isolated position outside of a network of writers and disconnected from any early literary traditions would lead to a very limited understanding of their work and would obscure the significance of their social criticisms.<sup>10</sup>

In his chapter on 'The Novel' in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (1998), Lawrence Jones links three key themes to the majority of novels written between 1890 and 1934, which highlight the positive social outlook present in a large number of these works.<sup>11</sup> Jones argues that novels written within this 'Late Colonial Period' tend to depict New Zealand as the 'Pastoral Paradise' or 'the Just City' and reflect a belief in the social evolution of New

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<sup>7</sup> Kirstine Moffat, 'Destruction, Transformation, Rebellion, Alienation: The Critique of Puritanism in Pre-1930 New Zealand Novels', *JNZL: Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 16 (2000), pp. 86 – 96. The term 'Pastoral Paradise' is taken from Jones, 'The Novel', p. 120.

<sup>8</sup> John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Transitions, 1998), pp. 3 – 5; Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> The focus of the thesis is on Lee and Devanny in particular because their fiction is very critical of contemporary society and because they have generally been neglected in historical scholarship.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Lee was in contact with novelist Robin Hyde. Jones, *Picking Up the Traces*, p. 363. Devanny was in contact with New Zealand politicians. See Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1999), pp. 28 – 32.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, 'The Novel'. It should be noted that Jones does not claim that these are fixed and inflexible dates, but that they serve as appropriate loose literary periods based upon strong links between authors in terms of style and themes.



Zealand society.<sup>12</sup> Novels, such as Stanley Wright's *Oak Uprooted: A Romance of Early New Zealand* (1934), which carries themes relating to the development of land from wild to civilised, and Alan Mulgan's *Spur of Morning* (1934) with its positive depiction of New Zealand society, serve as examples of these trends in New Zealand literature.<sup>13</sup> Jones notes that these novels are more critical in their approach to New Zealand society than those published directly after Pākehā settlement, in what Jones terms the 'Pioneer Period' (1861 – 1889), because they begin to address a number of social issues.<sup>14</sup> Jones uses the heavy critique of the sexual repression produced by a puritanical society found in Hector Bolitho's *Solemn Boy* (1927) and the call for female equality in the novels of Edith Grossmann as examples of how novels in this era that had shifted from the depictions of New Zealand society found in the 'Pioneer Period.'<sup>15</sup> However, for Jones, these social critiques, including those present in the novels of Jean Devanny, were reflective of an 'evolutionary faith'.<sup>16</sup> The social issues addressed in these novels were problems that, Jones argues, the authors of the early twentieth century believed would be worked through as New Zealand matured.<sup>17</sup>

'Evolutionary novels', and those which depicted positive aspects of New Zealand society, are useful to historians because they draw on, and reinscribe, myths about social equality found in 'booster' literature of the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> These myths were used during the early twentieth century to entrench

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<sup>12</sup> Jones, 'The Novel', p. 139.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Mulgan, *Spur of Morning* (London: Dent, 1934).

<sup>14</sup> For further information on the 'Pioneer Period' see Jones, 'The Novel', p. 120 – 134.

<sup>15</sup> Hector Bolitho, *Solemn Boy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927); Jones, 'The Novel', pp. 140 – 142.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, 'The Novel', p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> For more on 'Evolutionary Progress' in the novels of early twentieth century writers see Jones, 'The Novel', p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, 'Utopianism and the Creation of New Zealand National Identity', *Utopian Studies*, 12 (2001), pp. 1– 18. The term 'booster literature' is taken from James Belich,

specific notions about the development of national identity. Often, these novels supported the dominant understanding of classlessness, advancing civilisation, radical political experimentation and increased gender equality. Sir Julius Vogel's *Anno Domini 2000* (1889), for instance, is a science-fiction, utopian novel, in which women held powerful leadership roles and were equal to men in a number of ways.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Archibald Forsyth wrote about 'equalistic individualism' in his 1897 novel *Rapara; or The Rights of the Individual in the State*.<sup>20</sup> Jones argues that this attitude towards society was visible in the New Zealand novel up until the publication of work by Sargeson, Hyde and John Mulgan when an 'anti-myth' of New Zealand as a stultifying, conformist, puritanical trap became the dominant literary trope.<sup>21</sup> It has often been argued by literary scholars, such as Lawrence Jones and Stuart Murray, that it was in the fiction of the late 1930s writers that a distinctively 'New Zealand' literature began to emerge.<sup>22</sup> Thus, those writing prior to the mid-1930s have frequently been side-lined. The notion that the first distinctively New Zealand literature was produced in the late 1930s was influenced by literary nationalists who, from the 1930s onwards, were dismissive of what they regarded as the highly derivative nature of much nineteenth and early twentieth century New Zealand writing. This can be seen in the way in which Alan Mulgan has been discussed within the history of New Zealand literature.

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*Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 153 – 154.

<sup>19</sup> Dominic Alessio, 'Promoting Paradise: Utopianism and National Identity in New Zealand, 1870 - 1930', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 42 (2008), p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, 'The Novel', p. 137.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, *Picking Up the Traces*, p. 173. For Jones the anti-myth is a trope in New Zealand fiction where society is depicted critically and there is little evidence of a belief in the evolution of society. The authors producing works reflecting the 'anti-myth' are directly opposing many of the ideas expressed by earlier New Zealand writers.

<sup>22</sup> Jones, 'The Novel', p. 161; Stuart Murray, *Never a Soul at Home: New Zealand Literary Nationalism and the 1930s* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1998), p. 156.

Alan Mulgan was a New Zealand journalist and literary critic who published poetry, plays and novels, as well as several works of non-fiction in the early twentieth century. Mulgan has generally been thought of as a key figure in early New Zealand literature, not particularly due to the impact of his own writing, but because of how he was used by the authors and critics of the *Phoenix* generation.<sup>23</sup> The *Phoenix* generation were a group of writers publishing in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, who were critical of New Zealand literature produced prior to this period. They had a significant impact on how late nineteenth and early twentieth century writing has been regarded in both literary and historical scholarship. Writers associated with the *Phoenix* generation and later literary critics often represented Alan Mulgan's works as an embodiment of many of the key themes of early twentieth century New Zealand literature that the poets A. R. D. Fairburn (1904 – 1957), Denis Glover (1912 – 1980), and novelists such as Sargeson, Hyde and John Mulgan reacted against.<sup>24</sup> For instance, while still depicting England as 'Home', Alan Mulgan's *Spur of Morning* encapsulates images of a 'Pastoral Paradise' in its description of the New Zealand landscape. The novel also reflects the theme of the 'Just City' through the overall positive portrayal of society and the apparent acceptance of ingrained social values.<sup>25</sup> Writers of the *Phoenix* generation sought to move away from the social idealism, Georgian prose, and conventional plots that pervaded novels like Alan Mulgan's *Spur of Morning*.<sup>26</sup> In Jones' comparison between the idealyllic sentiments

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<sup>23</sup> Jones, *Picking Up the Traces*, pp. 71 – 73.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, *Picking Up the Traces*, p. 173.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, *Picking Up the Traces*, pp. 72 – 73. Significantly, the novel ends with Sylvia, the central female character, choosing to marry the New Zealand protagonist instead of the more typically British character; an event which for literary critic John O'Leary symbolises a desire for the development of a New Zealand identity. John O'Leary, 'Alan Mulgan, 1881–1962', *Kōtare 2008 — Essays in New Zealand Literary Biography*, Early Male Prose Writers, (2008).

<sup>26</sup> This interpretation of Alan Mulgan's novel has been supported by the parody of *Spur of Morning* written by Frank Sargeson and the publication of *Man Alone*, which John Mulgan's

present in Alan Mulgan's novel and the harsh social criticisms present in John A. Lee's *Children of the Poor*, published in the same year, they appear to be from two distinctly different eras.<sup>27</sup> One relied on traditional plot lines, Georgian prose and was fundamentally positive, while the other offered a searing social commentary closer to the style used by modernist writers.

This perceived break between the 'modern' and the 'out-dated' represented in the shift from novels such as Alan Mulgan to the works of Lee and John Mulgan (Alan Mulgan's son) has helped to form one of the more dominant myths about the history of New Zealand literature. Some literary criticism has a tendency to imply that *the* New Zealand novel emerged from a vacuum in the mid-1930s with the publication of Hyde's Starkie novels, *The Godwits Fly*, and Mulgan's *Man Alone*.<sup>28</sup> The short stories of Sargeson and the 'modern' poetry of Fairburn and Glover, with their critical approach to the depiction of New Zealand society and the construction of what Jones terms 'the Unjust City', helped to further such an understanding of literature originating from this period.<sup>29</sup> The works of these writers were considered by contemporary critics, and later literary scholars, as the first good quality New Zealand literature due to the literary tropes they drew upon and the style in which they wrote. As literary modernism became increasingly popular internationally with the publication of the novels of D. H. Lawrence in England and the work of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald in North America, New Zealand literature began to be critically analysed, by both

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biographer, Paul Day, argues was a conscious attempt to negate the positive depiction of society expressed by his father. Paul Day, *John Mulgan* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1977); Evans, pp. 130 -131.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, 'The Novel', p. 134.

<sup>28</sup> Robin Hyde, *Passport to Hell* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1936); Robin Hyde, *Nor the Years Condemn* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1938); Robin Hyde, *The Godwits Fly* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1938).

<sup>29</sup> For more information on the idea of the Unjust City read Jones, *Picking Up the Traces*, pp. 173 – 200.

New Zealand and international scholars, in terms of how it fitted within this movement. The *Phoenix* generation was particularly aligned with the American style of modernist writing.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the New Zealand literature, which has generally been viewed as the first ‘good quality’ literature tends to conform to a number of the stylistic trends connected with modernism.<sup>31</sup>

The novels of Hyde and John Mulgan, short stories of Sargeson and the poetry of Fairburn, Glover and R. A. K. Mason are all critical of contemporary society, draw on the work of North American modernists, often contain the theme of individual alienation, and tend to be written in direct, realistic prose.<sup>32</sup> These writers, as well as contemporary literary critics, emphasised the distinction between such works and those of the early New Zealand writers. Literary critic and poet James K. Baxter described New Zealand literature prior to the late 1930s as ‘[t]he Georgian dilemma’ which ‘had its roots in the structure of New Zealand society: in the great pressure towards conformity which prevented poets, and novelists also, from exercising a free and critical insight.’<sup>33</sup> He argued that ‘[t]hey [early twentieth century writers] were literally afraid of what they might find themselves writing; and the demand by every newspaper reviewer for an optimistic, sentimental tone prevented them from following up their best work.’<sup>34</sup> This implies that those authors publishing in the late 1930s challenged the older, out-dated, traditions and were fearless in their attempts at depicting life honestly. For many literary critics and historians these writers represented a new and

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<sup>30</sup> Jones, ‘The Novel’, p. 161; Murray, p. 156.

<sup>31</sup> The modernist movement in English literature, which emerged in the early twentieth century, sought to challenge traditional, particularly Georgian, construction of prose through experimental and innovative writing styles. Often these works were critical of contemporary society.

<sup>32</sup> MacD. P. Jackson and Elizabeth Caffin, ‘Poetry’, in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, 2nd edn (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 433, 437 – 438; Jones, ‘The Novel’, pp. 156 – 160.

<sup>33</sup> Jackson and Caffin, p. 432.

<sup>34</sup> Jackson and Caffin, p. 432.

‘advanced’ age not only in terms of literary style, but as a representation of the shifts in wider society as well.<sup>35</sup> This view was supported by a number of other prominent critics publishing in the mid-twentieth century including James Bertram and Allen Curnow. Such an understanding of New Zealand literature was heavily drawn on by literary nationalists, such as Bertram, Curnow, A. R. D. Fairburn and Denis Glover, who were searching for evidence of a unique New Zealand identity.<sup>36</sup>

The literary nationalists of the 1930s and the writers of the *Phoenix* generation not only dismissed earlier literary traditions due to style, but also because the majority of fiction was produced by female authors.<sup>37</sup> With the exception of Katherine Mansfield, women writing in the early twentieth century were treated with antagonism by misogynist writers of the *Phoenix* generation. Both Denis Glover and A. R. D. Fairburn, for instance, were extremely critical of poetry produced by women in the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>38</sup> Fairburn referred to these female poets as ‘the menstrual school’.<sup>39</sup> While criticism was levelled more directly at poetry, this attitude was also detectable in the *Phoenix* generations review of female novelists. The novels of Jane Mander, Devanny and even Robin Hyde were downplayed by Frank Sargeson as ‘minor’ and ‘feminine’ that focussed on ‘isolated details and moments of life’.<sup>40</sup> Because a large number of early twentieth century authors were women, this added to the unjust neglect of New Zealand literature published prior to the mid-1930s.

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<sup>35</sup> See Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 379 – 383; James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland: The Penguin Press, 2001), pp. 333 – 337.

<sup>36</sup> Murray, pp. 28 – 30.

<sup>37</sup> Jones, *Picking Up the Traces*, p. 427.

<sup>38</sup> Lawrence Jones, ‘Towards “Until the Walls Fall Down”’: An Intended History of New Zealand Literature 1932-1963’, *The Journal of New Zealand Studies*, 5 (1995), p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Whiteford, ‘Eileen Duggan, 1894 - 1972’, *Kōtare*, 3, (2009).

<sup>40</sup> Frank Sargeson, *Conversation in a Train: And Other Critical Writing*, ed. by Kevin Cunningham (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1983), pp. 28 – 33.

In *Destiny Apart* Keith Sinclair suggests that in the early twentieth century it 'was constantly asserted that a nation must inevitably produce a national literature', and that this national literature would 'be both a consequence of, and an encouragement to, nationalism.'<sup>41</sup> This is how an array of scholars have presented the rise of modernist writing in New Zealand literature. The writing of Hyde, Sargeson and the majority of the 1930s poets, were considered as evidence that New Zealand had started to articulate itself as a culture separate from Britain. A number of writers self-consciously sought to express a uniquely 'New Zealand' quality to their writing, thus helping to reinforce the notion that they were the first to write about New Zealand honestly and in a distinctive 'New Zealand' style.<sup>42</sup> Because writers and critics publishing in the late 1930s and early 1940s placed a great deal of emphasis upon the works produced in this period, the writers of the *Phoenix* generation have held a privileged place in the history of New Zealand literature and within New Zealand historical scholarship in general.<sup>43</sup> It is likely that historians have tended to favour literature discussed positively by literary critics as historical evidence due to the body of literary criticism on such sources, although this is not explicitly noted by historians. This has possibly led to novels outside the canon being somewhat neglected within historical scholarship (until recently). Thus, the works of the modernist writers, such as John Mulgan, have often received more critical attention from historians than writers such as Devanny and Lee.

Because they have often been side-lined in literary scholarship, writers publishing in the 1920s and early 1930s have often been dismissed in New

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<sup>41</sup> Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity* (Wellington: Allen and Unwin in association with the Port Nicholson Press, 1986), p. 46.

<sup>42</sup> Murray, p. 249.

<sup>43</sup> Murray, p. 249.

Zealand histories. This has resulted in an emphasis on John Mulgan's 1939 novel *Man Alone* within historical scholarship focussed on New Zealand culture in the early twentieth century.<sup>44</sup> This is largely due to the position the novel has held within traditional literary criticism as well as the historical events depicted within it.<sup>45</sup> Peter Whiteford opens his edited collection of John Mulgan's letters by describing *Man Alone* 'a single novel, influential beyond expectations; a title that has become almost metonymically embedded in the nation's language' which raised Mulgan 'to a heroic status' after his death.<sup>46</sup> This attitude illustrates the way in which Mulgan's novel has often been regarded by early literary scholars and a variety of historians. Heavily influenced by the writing of Hemingway - the title of *Man Alone* taken from Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937) and even described by Mulgan as 'Hemingwayesque' - the novel fitted well within the style the literary nationalists were most inclined to appreciate as modern and therefore *Man Alone* has been held up as New Zealand's first quintessential New Zealand novel.<sup>47</sup> Because Mulgan's work is thoroughly critical of many aspects of New Zealand society it was seen to challenge the overly positive portrayal of New Zealand society present in earlier literature.<sup>48</sup> Further aligning it with the trends of the modernist is the style of prose; Mulgan wrote *Man Alone* in an 'unassuming style', which helped to add to the perception that it was unique in its honest depiction of New Zealand society.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> John Mulgan, *Man Alone* (Auckland: Penguin Group, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> This novel also received a large amount of attention because it was the only novel written by Mulgan before his death.

<sup>46</sup> *A Good Mail: Letters of John Mulgan*, ed. by Peter Whiteford (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011), p. ix.

<sup>47</sup> Whiteford, *A Good Mail: Letters of John Mulgan*, p. 147; Ernest Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955).

<sup>48</sup> C. K. Stead, 'John Mulgan: A Question of Identity (1979)', in *In the Glass Case: Essays on New Zealand Literature* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 71.

<sup>49</sup> Evans, p. 130.



Literary critic James Bertram was the first to describe *Man Alone* as a milestone in the history of the New Zealand novel. In a review of *Man Alone* published in 1940, Bertram described the novel as ‘the first serious achievement in the novel form by a New Zealander’.<sup>50</sup> The author of *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (1940), a book produced for the centenary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, E. H. McCormick was more critical. Nevertheless, he still reviewed the novel in generally positive terms writing that to ‘say that *Man Alone* is the best constructed New Zealand novel yet to appear is to go beyond a question of mere technique’.<sup>51</sup> J. C. Reid was equally appreciative of the novel, writing in 1946 that *Man Alone* was ‘an interesting novel, the re-reading of which deepens the regret that this brilliant young man was one of the casualties of the recent war.’<sup>52</sup> These reviews laid the foundations for the myth that *Man Alone* was ‘the fullest prose rendering of what the New Zealand twenties and thirties felt like.’<sup>53</sup> This myth gained increasing currency later in the century.<sup>54</sup> While not read widely at the time of its original publication, particularly in New Zealand, by the late 1980s *Man Alone* had become a popular text in New Zealand schools and had come to be considered ‘a classic of New Zealand fiction.’<sup>55</sup> Literary critic C. K. Stead, writing in 1979, described finding Mulgan’s novel ‘simultaneously ‘modern’ and New Zealand.’ Bertram, again writing a critical essay on the novel in 1969,

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<sup>50</sup> James Bertram, ‘John Mulgan: Between Two Wars’, in *Flight of the Phoenix: Critical Notes on New Zealand Writers* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1985), p. 38.

<sup>51</sup> McCormick, p. 179.

<sup>52</sup> J. C. Reid, *Creative Writing in New Zealand: A Brief Critical History* (Auckland: Printed for the Author by Whitcombe and Tombs, 1946), p. 59.

<sup>53</sup> Joan Stevens, *The New Zealand Novel 1860-1965* (Auckland: Reed Publishing (NZ), 1966), p. 62.

<sup>54</sup> Murray, pp. 199 – 202.

<sup>55</sup> Vincent O’Sullivan, ‘Mulgan, John’, *Oxford Reference Online*, 1999  
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t200.e845>> [accessed 14 February 2012].

described *Man Alone* as possessing ‘undeniable power’.<sup>56</sup> Positive criticism like this has afforded *Man Alone* a privileged position within the history of New Zealand literature. In contrast, Stuart Murray, in *Never a Soul at Home*, has observed that Mulgan’s work was in actuality ‘the product of the most laborious nationalist myth-making.’<sup>57</sup>

*Man Alone* has come to occupy a prominent place in 1920s and 1930s historical scholarship because it has been privileged within New Zealand literary criticism. Keith Sinclair has asserted that in the 1930s, New Zealand literature ‘had at last found its feet’ after the publication of *Man Alone*, and the novels and short stories of Hyde and Sargeson.<sup>58</sup> Mulgan’s novel has been described as ‘seminal’ by James Belich.<sup>59</sup> In his chapter ‘The Climate of Opinion’ in *The Oxford History of New Zealand* Peter Gibbons suggests that Mulgan, along with Hyde, Sargeson, and in this case Lee, were part of a smaller group of prose writers to reach the quality of writing produced by the poets in the 1930s.<sup>60</sup> More recently, Christina Stachurski has argued that Mulgan’s novel has been, and is, of enormous cultural significance to New Zealand.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, when historians have examined the cultural history of early twentieth New Zealand *Man Alone* has

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<sup>56</sup> Stead, p. 69; James Bertram, ‘John Mulgan in Perspective’, in *Flight of the Phoenix: Critical Notes on New Zealand Writers* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1985), p. 43.

<sup>57</sup> Murray, p. 199. As Murray notes, the fact that Johnson, the novel’s protagonist, is British and returns to England at the end of the novel, and that Mulgan wrote *Man Alone* after he had been living in England for six years is significant given how literary nationalists used the novel. Arguably, the novel was held up to be a brilliant work of New Zealand literature because Mulgan had grown up in New Zealand, the significance of the style of prose to New Zealand literary nationalists and because the majority of the novel is set within New Zealand. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the style and themes within the novel also demonstrate the importance of international literature on New Zealand writing.

<sup>58</sup> Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*, p. 269.

<sup>59</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 334.

<sup>60</sup> Peter J. Gibbons, ‘The Climate of Opinion’, in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Rice, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 332. Gibbon’s assessment of Lee’s works is significant in terms of New Zealand historical scholarship. Often Lee is ignored or treated as a pre-cursor to the work of Mulgan and Hyde, thus Gibbon’s treatment of Lee is rather unique.

<sup>61</sup> Christina Stachurski, *Reading Pakeha: Fiction and Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Cross/cultures (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 1.

often been the first novel addressed, and is generally invoked as a reference to show the turning point from colonial literature to new form of socially critical fiction in literary culture.<sup>62</sup> However, *Man Alone* ought not to be considered by historians as the novel which best reflects 1920s and 1930s New Zealand.

Despite literary nationalists' efforts to establish themselves as the first social critics, recent literary scholarship has shown that social criticism was present in New Zealand literature well before the late 1930s.<sup>63</sup> In 'Destruction, Transformation, Rebellion, Alienation: The Critique of Puritanism in Pre-1930 New Zealand Novels', Kirstine Moffat argues that critiques of the puritanical aspects of New Zealand society can be found in novels from the 1890s onwards. Novels, such as Reve Wardon's *Macpherson's Gully*, published in 1892, began to question the pressure placed on society by the ingrained middle-class religious values that permeated New Zealand during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>64</sup> Constance Clyde's 1905 novel, *A Pagan's Love*, also examined the negative presence of puritanism in New Zealand.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Jane Mander, publishing in the 1920s, questioned the repressive nature of puritanism in her 1920 novel *The Story of a New Zealand River*, where the central character, Alice Roland, develops away from her deeply-rooted puritanism to a more emancipated self.<sup>66</sup> Mander's other New Zealand novels also critiqued further aspects of New Zealand society, particularly issues of female equality. Likewise, Elsie Story's

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<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, *Man Alone* has often been, as Vincent O'Sullivan notes, 'grossly misrepresented'. Somewhat strangely, a novel concerned with critiquing a society which alienates and isolates individuals has been held up as a celebration of the New Zealand male's battle against nature and the law. This has led the novel to be misconceived as both sexist and racist. While this understanding of *Man Alone* has tended to circulate more within general perceptions of the novel rather than within academic analysis, it has still seeped through into historical scholarship. O'Sullivan; Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male - A History*, Revised (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 252 – 256.

<sup>63</sup> Moffat, 'Destruction, Transformation, Rebellion, Alienation'.

<sup>64</sup> Moffat, 'Destruction, Transformation, Rebellion, Alienation', p. 88.

<sup>65</sup> Moffat, 'Destruction, Transformation, Rebellion, Alienation', p. 91.

<sup>66</sup> Moffat, 'Destruction, Transformation, Rebellion, Alienation', pp. 90 – 91.

*The Tired Angel* (1924) questioned contemporary social conventions through a negative depiction of the consequences of strict marriage laws, which made it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships.<sup>67</sup> It is within this body of socially critical literature that Jean Devanny and John A. Lee sit as authors. While these authors were largely ignored by the *Phoenix* generation and both contemporary and later literary critics and often pushed to the side as not ‘first rank even amongst New Zealand fiction’, their works reveal a large amount about the social climate of 1920s and 1930s New Zealand through their critiques.<sup>68</sup>

Because *Man Alone* focuses on many social issues around the depression and economic hardship many New Zealanders faced in the early 1930s, it provides a window to investigate aspects of life in early twentieth century New Zealand. But it is certainly not the only novel to do so. Therefore, in considering 1920s and 1930s New Zealand history, scholars should look beyond *Man Alone* to other authors, such as Devanny and Lee. Indeed, their work, as this study will show, reveals insightful nuances and discourses relevant to studies of gender, race, and class popular in the work of historians from the late sixties onwards. Historians have already begun to draw on the work of 1920s and 1930s novelists, Jock Phillips, for instance, refers to the work of John A. Lee and Jane Mander, devoting a chapter that considers John Mulgan’s *Man Alone* in his exploration of masculinity in *A Man’s Country?*<sup>69</sup> However, this study contends that there is still more insights to be found. A deeper analysis of those novels outside the cannon established by the literary nationalists is important when examining early

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<sup>67</sup> Jones, ‘The Novel’, p. 137; McCormick, p. 173. McCormick refers to Lee’s *Children of the Poor* in such terms.

<sup>68</sup> McCormick, p. 173.

<sup>69</sup> Phillips, *A Man’s Country?*. While I do not agree with a number of ways that Phillips deconstructs these novels, his *A Man’s Country?* still demonstrates how historians are able to use the fiction of lesser known authors to investigate social perceptions present in the period they were published.

twentieth century New Zealand, because many of these writers, including Devanny and Lee, offer insights that disturb and reconfigure those myths that for so long have circulated in New Zealand national narratives.

Jean Devanny was born in 1894 in Ferntown, New Zealand, and immigrated to Australia in 1929 with her husband and family.<sup>70</sup> In New Zealand, a number of the men in Devanny's family were employed as coal miners and later became involved in working class unions.<sup>71</sup> Devanny was also interested in class politics, giving public lectures, and later, after leaving New Zealand, joining the Communist Party of Australia.<sup>72</sup> Devanny published her first novel in 1926 and went on to write several more based in New Zealand. Four novels were written and published before her departure to Australia, *The Butcher Shop* (1926), *Lenore Divine* (1926), *Dawn Beloved* (1928), and *Riven* (1929), and three after her arrival; *Bushman Burke* (1930), *Devil Made Saint* (1930), and *Poor Swine* (1932).<sup>73</sup> After the publication of *Poor Swine*, Devanny turned away from a New Zealand context, preferring instead to set her stories Australia. The majority of her New Zealand novels critiqued social conventions in early twentieth century through a Marxist framework.

As well as exploring the issues related to economic class divisions, Devanny sought to address the repression of women within marriage by referring to them as their own distinctive 'class' category. Through Marxist rhetoric she asserted that women were held down and repressed by men; not the fault of individuals, but as

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<sup>70</sup> Ferrier, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Ferrier, pp. 18 – 19.

<sup>72</sup> Ferrier, pp. 1, 18 – 19.

<sup>73</sup> Jean Devanny, *The Butcher Shop* (London: Duckworth, 1926); Jean Devanny, *Lenore Divine* (London: Duckworth, 1926); Jean Devanny, *Dawn Beloved* (London: Duckworth, 1928); Jean Devanny, *Riven* (London: Duckworth, 1929); Jean Devanny, *Bushman Burke* (London: Duckworth, 1930); Jean Devanny, *Devil Made Saint* (London: Duckworth, 1930); Jean Devanny, *Poor Swine* (London: Duckworth, 1932).

a result of the social environment, and conventions, surrounding marriage. Devanny did not claim to be a feminist, insisting that the ideals of this movement were not in sync with her commitment to socialism.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, her novels are generally focussed on the development and growth of female characters, who, through their own study of socialism or through their experiences, question the role they are expected to conform to.

Devanny was also critical of contemporary Pākehā attitudes towards Māori. Her use of Māori characters sought to draw attention to, and disturb, some of the more direct racial stereotypes in New Zealand society. Despite the influence of D. H. Lawrence on her writing, Devanny's style aligned her with the Georgian writers criticised by the *Phoenix* generation rather than in the modernist camp. This has led Devanny's fiction to be marginalised in New Zealand literary history. Her novels often contained melodramatic plots and move between literary genres as she searched for her place as a writer.<sup>75</sup>

John A. Lee gained more critical attention than Jean Devanny. This most likely due to his position in Parliament and because his fiction was closer to the style used by Frank Sargeson and John Mulgan. John A. Lee, born in Dunedin in 1891, was a Labour MP who published a large amount of writing during his lifetime, both fiction and non-fiction. In his early years Lee had been a petty thief and a swagger, attending Burnham Industrial School and later jailed for smuggling liquor, before he joined the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in 1916.<sup>76</sup> While fighting in the Western Front Lee won the Distinguished Conduct

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<sup>74</sup> Kirstine Moffat, 'Introduction to Lenore Divine', in *Lenore Divine* (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), p. xxxii.

<sup>75</sup> Jones, 'The Novel', pp. 148 – 149.

<sup>76</sup> Erik Olssen, 'Lee, John Alfred Alexander - Biography', *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2010 <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/418/1>> [accessed 4 May 2012].

Medal and lost his arm.<sup>77</sup> After World War One he returned to New Zealand and joined the Labour Party.<sup>78</sup>

Lee started his literary career with the publication of his most famous novel, the semi-autobiographical *Children of the Poor* in 1934, which was originally published anonymously.<sup>79</sup> Two more novels promptly followed the publication of *Children of the Poor: The Hunted* in 1936, which also traced the early life of Albany Porcello, and *Civilian into Soldier* in 1937.<sup>80</sup> *The Politician* was also written during the 1930s, but due to its sexual content was not published until 1987 after Lee's death in 1982.<sup>81</sup> Several other novels and short stories were written and published by Lee through the middle of the twentieth century. However, these have generally been considered as popular fiction rather than the more serious prose published in the 1930s.<sup>82</sup> Lee's 1930s novels, *Children of the Poor*, *The Hunted* and *Civilian into Soldier*, were greatly influenced by his socialist beliefs and highlighted a number of issues around the exploitation of the working class, puritanism and hypocrisy in society.<sup>83</sup> Thus, this thesis focusses solely on these three novels.

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<sup>77</sup> Olssen, 'Lee, John Alfred Alexander - Biography'.

<sup>78</sup> Olssen, 'Lee, John Alfred Alexander - Biography'.

<sup>79</sup> Lee soon admitted he was the author and his name appears on later editions. John A. Lee, *Children of the Poor*, 1986 ed. (Christchurch: Whitcoulls Publishers, 1934); Erik Olssen, *John A. Lee* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1977), pp. 67 – 69. However, *Children of the Poor* was not the first novel Lee wrote. During the First World War Lee had written a short novel concerning his experiences, however *Soldier* was not published until the 1970s. John A. Lee, *Soldier* (Wellington: A. W. & A. H. Reed, 1976); Ken Arvidson, 'Lee, John A.', *Oxford Reference Online*, 1999

<<http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t200.e688>> [accessed 7 May 2012].

<sup>80</sup> John A. Lee, *The Hunted*, 1975 ed. (Wellington: Price Milburn, 1936); John A. Lee, *Civilian into Soldier*, 1963 ed. (London: May Fair Books Ltd, 1937).

<sup>81</sup> John A. Lee, *The Politician* (Auckland: Century Hutchinson, 1987).

<sup>82</sup> Jones, 'The Novel', p. 153.

<sup>83</sup> The 'socialism' which Lee supported was based on a Fabian approach to the evolutionary process rather than revolutionary socialism. For more on Lee's political beliefs refer to James Smithies, 'John A. Lee, 1891 - 1982', *Kōtare 2008 — Essays in New Zealand Literary Biography*, Early Male Prose Writers, (2008) and Olssen, *John A. Lee*.

Because Lee wrote with a clear political purpose, his novels contain fewer contradictions and complexities than Devanny, and the political ideas come through more directly. As Eric McCormick has noted, Lee is guilty of some passages of ‘raw propaganda’ and his writing was viewed as ‘crude and old-fashion’ for the 1930s.<sup>84</sup> However, his nationalism and the social realism of his writing linked him more closely to John Mulgan and Frank Sargeson than other writers outside the modernist movement.<sup>85</sup>

Devanny and Lee have received considerably less attention in New Zealand historical scholarship than Mulgan’s *Man Alone* despite addressing a number of similar social issues. This is not only due to the privileged position given to Mulgan by Bertram, Day and later literary critics but has been influenced by the way that Devanny and Lee were in turn regarded by these influential figures. Lee was generally more accepted than Devanny, but both were somewhat side-lined by contemporary literary critics and later historians.

Contemporary literary criticism on Devanny is lacking. Where she is mentioned by New Zealand scholars it is usually in a negative sense. Devanny was heavily criticised in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand for her honest depiction of relationships and theories surrounding the sexual emancipation of women. Her only appearance in *Letters and Art in New Zealand* is in a brief comparison to novelist Jane Mander in relation to the erosion of taboos in literary culture.<sup>86</sup> Mander is depicted as pioneering, whereas Devanny is described as ‘lurid’. New

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<sup>84</sup> E. H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs New Zealand, 1940), p. 173.

<sup>85</sup> Smithies, ‘John A. Lee, 1891 - 1982’. An example of Lee’s nationalism is reflected through this quote from *Civilian into Soldier*; ‘War was like that. Men came from ends of Empire to name trenches or roads so that Australians died in Woolloomooloo Sap and got shelled to bits at Wattle Farm, Canadians ate mouthfuls of earth in Calgary Avenue, New Zealander bled in Wanganui Lane, and Tommy rested his dying head on the macadam at Hyde Park Corner.’ John A. Lee, *Civilian into Soldier*, p. 85.

<sup>86</sup> McCormick, p. 148.



Zealand newspaper reports were hardly more flattering. In 1932, the *Auckland Star* described Devanny as having named her novel *Poor Swine* ‘well and truly’ and continued on to say ‘[u]nfortunately for its success, although fortunately for humanity at large, the number of people who wish to read of swine and their wallowing is strictly limited’.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, in a response to her novel *Bushman Burke*, one reviewer opened by suggesting ‘it is not as bad as it’s painted – on the dustcover’ and closed with a redirected barb from Devanny’s own character, Burke, which they appear to sing in unison “My God, women’.<sup>88</sup> Devanny received a considerable amount of contemporary criticism after the publication of her first novel, *The Butcher Shop*, which was banned in New Zealand, Australia, Boston and Germany.<sup>89</sup> It was suggested in contemporary newspapers that *The Butcher Shop* was banned in New Zealand for its ‘frank portrayal of farm conditions’.<sup>90</sup> Thus, it is unsurprising that she has often been thought of as an Australian author, despite the fact her first seven novels were set in New Zealand. However, not all New Zealand responses were as critical.<sup>91</sup> After learning of her departure from New Zealand the *Evening Post* lamented that ‘another gem is lost from our literary diadem’.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, a large number of her reviews in England and North America were rather positive.<sup>93</sup>

Despite these rare moments of contemporary appreciation, a more considered reflection of Devanny’s New Zealand fiction in a national context has only recent decades been taken up by historians and literary scholars. Devanny’s growing importance to New Zealand history is reflected in her increasing

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<sup>87</sup> ‘The Bookshelf’, *AS*, 2 April 1932, p. 2.

<sup>88</sup> ‘Strong-Man and “Vamp”’, *AS*, 26 April 1930, p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Heather Roberts, ‘Introduction to the Butcher Shop’, in *The Butcher Shop* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1981), p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> Roberts, p. 11; Ferrier, p. 37.

<sup>91</sup> Ferrier, p. 37.

<sup>92</sup> ‘New Zealand Authors’, *Evening Post*, 29 March 1930.

<sup>93</sup> Ferrier, pp. 36 - 38

appearance in general histories of the country. For example, she is discussed in *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (2003) in regard to non-conformity.<sup>94</sup> A more sustained historical commentary on Devanny within New Zealand general history is offered by Peter Gibbons in ‘The Climate of Opinion.’<sup>95</sup> Gibbon’s compares her treatment of sexuality and feminism to that of Jane Mander and Edith Searle Grossmann (1863 – 1931) retrospectively, implying that she was one of a number of early female authors who wrote with a political purpose.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, even in this context she is still situated within the period directly before the rise of ‘significant’ New Zealand writing in the 1930s. Carole Ferrier’s biography, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* offers an intriguing insight to Devanny’s historical background, as well as an analysis of her novels.<sup>97</sup> However, the majority of the book focuses on Devanny’s life in Australia with only the first chapter concerned with her New Zealand based work.<sup>98</sup> More recent historical scholarship by Karen Charman has examined the role of eugenics in Devanny’s works, although this too has tended to focus on her later Australian novels.<sup>99</sup> Given that her earlier novels address a number of social and political issues in New Zealand Devanny’s writing should be utilised more by New Zealand historians interested in early twentieth century society.

Devanny’s novels are full of contradictions. Indeed, her writing reflects how she grappled with and tried to make sense of various social problems and political ideas that concerned her in the early twentieth century. These contradictions and inconsistencies, on the one hand, create issues for historians

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<sup>94</sup> King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, p. 374.

<sup>95</sup> Gibbons, p. 324.

<sup>96</sup> Gibbons, pp. 318, 324.

<sup>97</sup> Ferrier.

<sup>98</sup> Devanny’s New Zealand novels are discussed throughout the biography but only given a large degree of attention in the first chapter concerning her life in New Zealand.

<sup>99</sup> Karen Charman, ‘Eugenics and the 1930’s Novels of Jean Devanny and Eleanor Dark’ (Unpublished PhD thesis: Geelong: Deakin University Australia, 2012).

who might easily dismiss or simply neglect Devanny's novels as historical evidence. On the other hand, it is these very nuances, contrasts, and contradictions that makes Devanny's work so intriguing and worthwhile for researchers fascinated with the multiple perspectives and ambiguities often missed in historical representation. Indeed, Devanny's work provides a rich and textured archive for many aspects of life in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. The complexities Devanny presents is central to what makes her writing fascinating. Rather than dismissing her novel as 'nonsense' and mere fiction, historians might yet embrace them as viable archives to be closely considered, mined, and applied to contemporary interpretations of the period. Devanny's writing engages with the way in which her contemporaries grappled with new ideas while simultaneously dealing with ingrained social practices.

In contrast to Devanny, John A. Lee has received a much larger amount of, and generally more positive, critical attention from contemporaries and later literary critics and historians. After the publication of his second novel, the *Auckland Star* reported that '[a]lthough in construction and phraseology "The Hunted" leaves something to be desired, it is written with such bitter sincerity and occasionally with such eloquence, that it will not soon be forgotten by anyone who reads it.'<sup>100</sup> In a review of *Civilian into Soldier* published in the *Evening Post* (1937), the author claim that Lee had 'enriched the true New Zealand literature [...] immeasurably' and his three novels constituted 'original, authentic, indigenous literature.'<sup>101</sup> E. H. McCormick was more critical in his 1940 review of *Children of the Poor*, arguing that the novel 'contained too much unassimilated

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<sup>100</sup> 'The Hunted', *AS*, 17 October 1936, p. 30.

<sup>101</sup> 'The War as It Was', *EP*, 7 August 1937, p. 26.

descriptive matter and too many passages of raw propaganda.’<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, McCormick praised the novel for its exploration of the ‘New Zealand experience’ that he believed had not been addressed within a novel before.<sup>103</sup> Later literary critics were equally critical of Lee’s style and positive about the ‘honest’ depiction of poverty and the New Zealand underbelly represented in Lee’s works. Ken Arvidson describes *Children of the Poor* and *The Hunted* as the ‘finer’ of Lee’s novels due to their rich treatment of theme, but argues that both ‘books are marred [...] by Lee’s inability to achieve aesthetic distance.’<sup>104</sup>

Historians have also taken a greater interest in John. A. Lee’s fiction than they have in Jean Devanny. Keith Sinclair, for instance, used *Children of the Poor* to point to the misery of people living in poverty during the late nineteenth century New Zealand.<sup>105</sup> G. R. Hawke points out just how influential Lee’s novels have been to the mythologies produced around the Depression, suggesting they added to a body of sources that ‘emphasise a collective struggle against hardship imposed from outside.’<sup>106</sup> Peter Gibbons also approaches the novels in greater depth, observing that in *Children of the Poor* and *The Hunted* Lee ‘impaled the hypocritical wowsers and righteous authorities who made life a misery for those of lower social status.’<sup>107</sup> Lee’s novels receive their most critical historical attention in Erik Olssen’s *John A. Lee* and Jock Phillips *A Man’s Country?*<sup>108</sup> Olssen provides a detailed discussion of the events which drove Lee to write, the central purpose behind the production of his novels, as well as their

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<sup>102</sup> McCormick, p. 173.

<sup>103</sup> McCormick, p. 173.

<sup>104</sup> Arvidson, ‘Lee, John A.’, *Oxford Reference Online*.

<sup>105</sup> Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*, p. 172.

<sup>106</sup> G. R. Hawke, *The Making of New Zealand: An Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 123.

<sup>107</sup> Gibbons, p. 332.

<sup>108</sup> Olssen, *John A. Lee*, pp. 67 – 71; Phillips, *A Man’s Country?*, pp. 194 – 196.

critical reception.<sup>109</sup> However, Olssen does not look beyond the way that the novels reflect Lee's personal beliefs, or how they are representative of 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. Jock Phillips explores the ways in which Lee's novels reveal the nuances of 1930s New Zealand, drawing on *Civilian into Soldier* as an illustration of, and challenge to, values surrounding masculinity in the early twentieth century.<sup>110</sup> For Phillips, Lee's *Civilian into Soldier* effectively disturbed predominant myths about the New Zealand soldier; and particularly the soldier as a gentleman.<sup>111</sup>

Despite this, it is more often Lee's political life rather than his novels that is discussed within historical scholarship. This is hardly surprising given the length of his time as a Member of Parliament, his work on the 1930s housing programme as the Under-Secretary of Finance, his radical politics, and his infamous attack on Prime Minister Michael Savage.<sup>112</sup> However, this has meant that historians tend to mention his writing career as a side-note to his political one. J. B. Condliffe describes Lee as 'a wounded veteran who had published the first of a bitter series of novels, characterised in his opening dedication as 'this story of the gutter'', before continuing to examine Lee's impact on the welfare state in New Zealand.<sup>113</sup> In his book, *The Slump: The 1930s Depression: Its Origins and Aftermath*, Tony Simpson makes reference to Lee as an 'accomplished prose writer', but focusses more on his political publications and political career.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Olssen, *John A. Lee*, pp. 67 – 71.

<sup>110</sup> Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, pp. 194 – 196.

<sup>111</sup> Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, p. 196.

<sup>112</sup> Robert Chapman, 'From Labour to National', in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Rice, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 359, 365 – 366.

<sup>113</sup> J. B. Condliffe, *The Welfare State in New Zealand* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1959), p. 62.

<sup>114</sup> Tony Simpson, *The Slump: The Thirties Depression: Its Origins and Aftermath* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 74.

Therefore, the novels themselves have received less critical attention than Lee's political life.

This study asserts that John A. Lee's *Children of the Poor*, *The Hunted*, and *Civilian into Soldier* deserve further analysis. They provide contemporary social commentaries on a variety of subjects from the presence and understanding of class, to attitudes towards religion and alcoholism. When considered more closely, John A. Lee's fiction offers multiple insights relevant to historical readings of the period. Most importantly, they challenge romantic myths about New Zealand national identity well before historians began to address such issues in the latter twentieth century. Indeed, as Jane Mander noted in the 1930s, such depictions of New Zealand society were 'a smack in the face to God's Own Country'.<sup>115</sup> With their intense critical focus on the social problems present in early twentieth century New Zealand the work of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee offers new insights by which a continued examination of the era might be take place. This thesis contends that their writing represent an under-utilised source in terms of historical scholarship, and thus, should be analysed in far greater depth.

When analysing the social commentary within the novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee it is important to understand how the authors used their characters to reflect certain attitudes towards society. Devanny used character types to help readers differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' social values. The aspects of New Zealand society that Devanny considered as positive, or socialist theories that Devanny hoped society would develop towards, are reflected through her 'strong' leading characters. Whereas negative actions and attitudes, such as drunkenness and puritanism, are linked to 'lower', mentally weaker, and less

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<sup>115</sup> Jones, *Picking Up the Traces*, p. 258.

culturally aware characters. Lee's central characters also tend to be depicted as having a strong underlying sense of morality that they are only forced to break from given the pressure of poverty and the control of a hypercritical and puritanical society. However, Lee's characters are not without their personal flaws, whereas Devanny's protagonists are often idealised. Both authors use their protagonists to support the socialist message within their novels and to critique the parts of 1920s and 1930s New Zealand society that they believed repressed the individual.

Devanny uses four central types of female characters in her New Zealand novels; the 'Natural Woman', the 'Innocent', the 'Jazz Age Girl', and the 'Weak Woman'.<sup>116</sup> The majority of Devanny's protagonists fit within the character type of the 'Natural Woman'. A number of these female characters start off as the 'Natural Woman' such as Margaret Messenger from *The Butcher Shop*, Lenore Divine from *Lenore Divine* and Dawn Devoy from *Dawn Beloved*. However, a few transform into this figure through the course novel, for example Lilian Cameron from *Poor Swine* and Flora Burke from *Bushman Burke*. Devanny places the 'Natural Woman' figures at the top of her imagined social hierarchy.<sup>117</sup> This figure first emerges in Margaret of *The Butcher Shop*, is established in Lenore Divine, and then experimented with and explored through Dawn, Lilian and Flora in Devanny's later novels. These characteristics are often highlighted by juxtaposition with another 'type' of woman, that of the 'Jazz Age Girl' or the 'Weak Woman'.

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<sup>116</sup> For more information on the continued use of character types in Devanny's novels refer to Roberts, pp. 21–22.

<sup>117</sup> Carole Ferrier argues that Lenore Divine, Dawn Devoy, from *Dawn Beloved*, and to a certain extent Lilian Sweet, from *Poor Swine*, contain autobiographical elements influenced by Devanny's own life. The characters' connections to Devanny have been used to explain why Dawn and Lenore feature as the figure of the intellectual women rebelling against social conventions, something Devanny did herself. Ferrier, p. 40; Moffat, 'Introduction to Lenore Divine', p. xviii.

The 'Jazz Age Girl' is set out as a character who is involved with the 'modern', popular and urban culture in the larger cities of New Zealand, particularly Wellington. While other characters within Devanny's novels move through similar environments, these women tend to be seduced by the, in Devanny's opinion, 'darker' side of these worlds. They often drink and flirt outrageously, and sometimes cross the line into promiscuity. They are also often depicted as selfish and unaware of society's problems. However, the central 'Jazz Age Girls', such as Flora and Alle, have 'goodness' that allows them to shift to a figure similar to the 'Natural Woman' after an ordeal in their lives. Significantly, the shift is both physical and mental; a greater adherence to naturalness and mental development causes these women to become physically more attractive. The transformations from 'bad' to 'good' are used by Devanny to highlight a number of negative effects that capitalism and rigid social values have had on 1920s New Zealand society.

Devanny also emphasises ingrained social conventions as unjust and hypocritical by linking them with her 'lower' characters. These women are represented as being incapable of developing. Miette Longstair from *The Butcher Shop* is one such example of this type of character. Miette, unlike the protagonist Margaret, has formally learnt socialism. However, she is not enraged about the position of the women as men's slaves within marriage in the same way Margaret is. Instead, Miette relishes her position as the inferior. Thus, Miette and Margaret are set up as two very types of distinct women. One who the reader is meant to sympathise with because she is inherently good but is forced to murder as the conventions of puritanical, patriarchal and capitalist society have oppressed and caged her. The 'other' who is created to be excessively disliked and viewed as



flawed due to fundamental traits, and, thus, represented the 'bad' aspects of society like social ignorance and promiscuity.

The male characters of Devanny's novels are also divided into categories. Similar to the female figures, lesser characters take on the form of 'weaker' types, whereas those more central to the plot fall into the roles of the 'Educator', the 'Lover' or the 'Handsome Husband'. The 'Educator' helps the female protagonists to develop intellectually and to gain a greater appreciation for culture. Often these men also teach the women about socialism. Significantly, the men who feature as the main 'Educator' within the novels are usually not the lover or the husband.<sup>118</sup> While, the 'Educator' is greatly respected by and often a close friend of the central 'Natural Woman', there is rarely any deeper emotional or physical relationship between them. The other central male figures tend to either fall under the 'Lover', the 'Soft' man, or the 'Handsome Husband'. The 'Soft' men, similar to the 'Jazz' girl, tend to be urban figures that drink and dance without paying much attention to politics or social issues. However, none of these male figures are central enough to undergo visible transformation; Devanny was far more interested in the development of her female characters. The 'Lover' plays a more pivotal role, but usually features as a plot device used to add greater tension to the narrative and to help the female protagonists come to a revelation about themselves or women's role within society. For example, Glengarry's appearance in *The Butcher Shop* reveals to Margaret that she is unsatisfied in her marriage, but is chained within it given people's view of her as the property of her husband. Like the female characters, these men are used by Devanny to challenge social conventions, such as Kowhatu Ngatoro in *Lenore Divine*, but the women

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<sup>118</sup> In many ways, this division of educational and physical relationships is a reflection of Devanny's understanding of love but also serves to demonstrate that the female protagonists are interested in socialism and education beyond a desire to get closer to a man.

certainly remain the heroines. The 'Handsome Husband' figure, represented through the characters Val Devoy in *Dawn Beloved*, Holly Virtue in *Lenore Divine*, Laurie Cameron in *Poor Swine*, and Barry Messenger in *The Butcher Shop*, are also significant in terms of Devanny's plots. The latter is the only one who is portrayed as a wholly respectable and 'good' man. The remaining three all have serious drinking problems and are not particularly satisfying husbands, often depicted as selfish and thoughtless.<sup>119</sup> These figures all supplied Devanny with a device through which to explore the problems of marriage within 1920s New Zealand.<sup>120</sup> It is important to understand how Devanny constructed characters within her novels as they are often used to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' aspects of society. Devanny critiques certain social conventions through attaching them to her weaker characters and praises other ideals, such as socialism, by linking them to her strong characters.

Lee's use of characterisation is rather different. Arguably this is due to the autobiographical nature of his novels.<sup>121</sup> Lee's characters are fictional, but they are largely based upon people from Lee's life. Albany Porcello, the protagonist of *Children of the Poor* and *The Hunted*, and John Guy from *Civilian into Soldier* are loosely based on Lee himself.<sup>122</sup> The central family of *Children of the Poor* is similar to Lee's own family, although Lee's sister and mother were not prostitutes like Rose and Albany's mother in the novel.<sup>123</sup> Significantly, Lee's mother, Mary Isabella Lee, wrote back against many of the fictional elements of *Children of the*

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<sup>119</sup> Jean Devanny, *Dawn Beloved*, p. 149.

<sup>120</sup> Given the critical response to *The Butcher Shop*, it is likely that Devanny set the remained of her 'Handsome Husband' figures up as inherently flawed to give provide a contemporary audience with more justification for the wives' dissatisfaction with the marriage.

<sup>121</sup> Gibbons, p. 332.

<sup>122</sup> Olssen, *John A. Lee*, p. 70.

<sup>123</sup> Olssen, *John A. Lee*, p. 70.

*Poor* in her autobiography *The Not So Poor*.<sup>124</sup> More than anything this demonstrates that many of parts of the novels were exaggerated episodes of Lee's own life. Lee highlighted his underlying political purpose through the circumstances and events that his characters experience. Often the central characters of the novels find themselves in bad positions through little fault of their own, for example the poverty of Albany Porcello's family in *Children of the Poor*. In *Children of the Poor* and *The Hunted* poverty and criminality are depicted as the fault of a failed social system rather than individual flaws. In terms of characterisation, this means that Lee's protagonists are somewhat more naïve and innocent than they would have been if were not for the political purpose behind the novels. Lee's characters are less idealised than Devanny's protagonists. For example, in *Civilian into Soldier*, John Guy is depicted as a swagger and a social outcast, but through the course of World War One he comes to be represented as a strong and intelligent man. However, these characters are still used to highlight the difference between 'good' and 'bad' social values. For example, the Manager and later the character, Foreman Alexander, of *The Hunted* are all used to demonstrate the prevalence of hypercritical and puritanical social values.

The construction of character within Devanny and Lee's novels is important to a thorough understanding of these two authors' works because it forms a central part of their critique of contemporary society. While Devanny and Lee's novels offer insight into the social realities of the 1920s and 1930s, they are still fictional and, thus, adhere to literary conventions and devices. Therefore, to analyse how these two authors grappled with contemporary issues, it is vital to

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<sup>124</sup> Mary Isabella Lee, *The Not So Poor*, ed. by Annabel Cooper (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1992).

consider how they used literary devices, such as characterisation, to further emphasise their central social protest. Devanny's novels exaggerate and highlight what Devanny perceived to be social issues through the use of 'good' and 'bad' characters. In contrast, Lee is a little less direct in his approach. Nevertheless, the construction of character in Lee's novels was still used to demonstrate his central theme.

To fully appreciate the works of Devanny and Lee it is necessary to understand where their writing fits into the history of New Zealand literature. How these novels have been addressed by literary critics in the past has had a profound impact on how historians have regarded Devanny and Lee's fiction. The *Phoenix* generation and contemporary literary critics emphasised the importance of late 1930s literature over that of New Zealand fiction from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Literary nationalists drew upon the interpretation of New Zealand literature and used it as evidence of a society advancing towards maturity through the development of a national literary culture. Thus, it appeared that the first good quality New Zealand literature emerged from a literary vacuum in the late 1930s with the publication of John Mulgan's *Man Alone* and the short stories of Frank Sargeson. This understanding of the history of New Zealand literature had a significant influence on the way in which historians have reconstructed 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. This myth has led historians to focus on *Man Alone* as the quintessential novel of this period. Thus novelists, such as Devanny and Lee, writing has been side-lined in historical scholarship because its importance was downplayed by the writers of the 1930s. However, recent literary scholarship has shown that the writers of the *Phoenix* generation drew on a long tradition of social criticism in New Zealand

literature. The novels of Devanny and Lee fit within this literary tradition and reveal just as much about New Zealand society in the 1920s and 1930s as Mulgan's *Man Alone*. Thus, this thesis contends that the fiction of Devanny and Lee should be readdressed and more thoroughly considered in historical scholarship. An analysis of these two authors would not be complete without an examination of how they use character to critique contemporary society. Devanny used 'strong' and 'weak' characters to demonstrate which aspects of society were 'bad' and 'good'. Lee constructs characters to highlight the failing social system. Having placed Devanny and Lee within relevant historical and literary contexts, the remaining chapters of this thesis turn to the core issue of how their fiction provides a nuanced insight into 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. If critical attention is turned from Mulgan's *Man Alone* as *the* novel of the period, does a different view of the 1920s and 1930s emerge?

## Chapter Two:

### **Gilded Ornaments and Sacred Obligations: The Role of Women in 1920s and 1930s Society**

To the unspoiled woman natural consummation of healthy desire is the strictest morality; the opposite lies in the loveless communion sanctioned by man-made custom. Let woman alone, and true morality can take care of itself. Shackle her, bind her with the chains of economic dependence, make her a gilded ornament, give her such conditions of life as call for painted lips, the pallid, sickening smiles of whoredom, and she falls from the height of God and becomes one with the dust of the earth.

Jean Devanny, *Lenore Divine*<sup>1</sup>

Jean Devanny's clarion call for a world in which women are both politically and economically equal and free to realise their innate morality highlights her complex attitudes to the role of women in the 1920s. This complexity is also apparent in historical scholarship, with some historians regarding the period as one in which women were able to enjoy greater gender equality and others pointing to the continued domestic responsibilities of many women during this era. As has been noted, Devanny was politically radical, using her fiction to protest at the restricted position of women and the many inequalities that they confronted. Her fiction thus epitomises, in extreme form, the emerging feminist sensibility of the period. However, in constructing her crusading narratives, Devanny also follows the conventions of the novel of social protest and the New Woman novel which dictate that the evils of oppression must be delineated in order for their full horror to be appreciated by the reader. For, it is through both the positive example of the heroine and the hero, and the negative example of the weak anti-heroes that Devanny makes her point. In her fiction, the feminist

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, ed. by Kirstine Moffat (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), p. 101.

rhetoric goes hand in hand with a detailed depiction of the narrow, inhibiting, domestic lives that many of her protagonists struggle to escape from.

John A. Lee's novels also emphasise the dominant social constructions of women as wives and mothers, although he is less actively critical of this understanding of female identity, concentrating on inequities of class rather than gender. For this reason, this chapter focusses primarily on the novels of Jean Devanny. In the novels of both authors men usually assume the breadwinning role with the lives of the female characters typically revolving around the domestic sphere.<sup>2</sup> Devanny's fiction, for instance, shows that married women were often trapped in these positions because they depended on their husbands for financial security. In addition, women were also pressured into the domestic role by restrictive social conventions. Devanny's novels assert that this understanding of female identity was repressive for women in a number of ways. This is made clear through her depictions of women who break with social norms, particularly those who fall pregnant outside of wedlock. While Devanny is radical in her approach to women's social roles, her fiction is also somewhat bafflingly conservative in relation to issues of morality and female education. For example, her female protagonists are all educated by males, never by females. Through the social critique and contradictions of Devanny's fiction and the reflection of social norms in Lee's novels, a complex understanding of gender relations is revealed to the reader. Once again, these texts demonstrate that, far from mere 'nonsense', novels can provide a rich and nuanced insight to historical moments, events, and lives. Indeed, it is precisely because Devanny's fiction is so messy and contradictory, that it prevents the period in which she was writing from being

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on male breadwinning see Melanie Nolan, "Politics Swept Under a Domestic Carpet"? Fracturing Domesticity and the Male Breadwinner Wage: Women's Economic Citizenship, 1920s - 1940s', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 27 (1993), pp. 199 – 217.

essentialised and allows the textured, multi-layered complexity of attitudes towards women in the 1920s to be revealed

When analysing Devanny's critique of society, it is important to note that she uses Marxist rhetoric to discuss these issues. Devanny's involvement within the miners unions, and later the Labour Party influenced how she viewed and interpreted society.<sup>3</sup> Devanny applied Marxist ideas in a unique fashion by linking them to her own hierarchy of gender roles. The critiques of rigid social protocols in *The Butcher Shop*, *Bushman Burke*, *Dawn Beloved*, *Lenore Divine*, *Poor Swine* and *Riven* are informed by socialist theories, with Devanny highlighting the capitalist origins of the economic oppression that both men and women confront. However, she also appropriates socialist understandings of class and applies this rhetoric to the lives of women. This perception of women as a class category in their own right is disconnected from the way in which historians and social theorists have traditionally defined 'class.' It is central to understanding how Devanny conceptualised women as having to do battle against both class oppression and gender inequality. The appropriation of Marxist language is one of the unique aspects of Devanny's social criticisms.

Historical scholarship that focuses on the role of women in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand shares some of the complexities and contradictions present within Devanny's fiction. In histories that depict 1920s and 1930s New Zealand as a time of social advancement, it is often assumed that women became increasingly liberated in the march towards modernisation.<sup>4</sup> However, recent histories

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<sup>3</sup> Devanny's correspondence with leading socialists such as Jack McDonald was particularly influential. Jack McDonald had help to set up the Socialist Party of Canada in the early 1920s before touring New Zealand promoting socialism. Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1999), pp. 31 – 32.

<sup>4</sup> For example, this understanding of women's role in society can be seen in James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland:



focusing on gender in this era have sought to challenge these assumptions, and emphasise the enduring power of the ‘cult of domesticity.’<sup>5</sup>

In a number of contemporary sources female equality is represented as an ideal that New Zealand was progressing towards during the 1920s and 1930s. As the political voices of women developed greater influence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, their perspectives found stronger expression in various public forums. Writing to the *Evening Star* in 1914, Kate Sheppard discussed a number of ways that female enfranchisement had helped to raise the social and political status of women in New Zealand.<sup>6</sup> While ultimately her article called for the need for further advances, particularly the ‘equality or partnership between husband and wife’, it also highlighted a variety of areas in which women had been granted greater equality through political reform. For some contemporary women, these earlier political reforms were viewed as the key to social change. In 1932 a reporter for the *Auckland Star* argued that ‘women are steadily pushing towards true equality.’<sup>7</sup> Charlotte MacDonald notes that through the 1920s and 1930s ‘[p]olitical ideologies and actions were seen as the path to social action and progress.’<sup>8</sup> The emphasis placed on the movement towards female equality within a range of contemporary sources has been used in a variety

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The Penguin Press, 2001), pp. 181 – 188; Erik Olssen, ‘Towards a New Society’, in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Rice, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 254 – 284.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Barbara Brookes, ‘Housewives’ Depression: The Debate over Abortion and Birth Control in the 1930s’, in *The Shaping of History: Essays from New Zealand Journal of History*, ed. by Judith Binney (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2001), pp. 196 – 210.

<sup>6</sup> Katherine Sheppard, ‘A Symposium on the Effects of Female Enfranchisement: What the Reform Has Accomplished and Is Capable of Achieving’, in *The Vote, the Pill and the Demon Drink: A History of Feminist Writing in New Zealand 1869 - 1993*, ed. by Charlotte Macdonald (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1993), pp. 73 – 75. Kate Sheppard was a prominent member of the Women’s Suffrage movement in New Zealand and was involved in political groups interested in furthering women’s rights through the early twentieth century. For more information on Sheppard refer to her biography Judith Devaliant, *Kate Sheppard: The Fight for Women’s Votes in New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Modern Women’, *Auckland Star*, 20 August 1932, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Macdonald, *The Vote, the Pill and the Demon Drink: A History of Feminist Writing in New Zealand 1869 - 1993* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1993), p. 89.

of ways within historical scholarship. Historians, such as Keith Sinclair, Erik Olssen and James Belich, use such attitudes to argue that women were able to enjoy more freedom in this era.

Women's suffrage, the 1919 reform that allowed women to stand for Parliament, and the breakdown of social boundaries concerning women's employment in industry that occurred in the first World War, have been used by historians to suggest that women were becoming increasingly equal to men in the early twentieth century. In *A Destiny Apart* (1986), Keith Sinclair posits that the First World War provided greater opportunities for women to work in a wider range of employment than had previously been available.<sup>9</sup> In 'Towards a New Society' (1992), Erik Olssen, describes the period from 1890 and 1940 as a time of transition in which women became more liberated.<sup>10</sup> Olssen asserts that the quest 'for greater equality' driven by women 'helped to reshape the family' and improve women's social standing.<sup>11</sup> Similarly Neill Atkinson, in 'The Rise and Fall of Happy Homes' (2005), states that 'new employment and leisure opportunities for women threatened the long-term stability of the happy home ideal.'<sup>12</sup> James Belich also represents this era as a time of progression for women in his discussion of 'The Mothers' Mutiny.'<sup>13</sup> Belich argues that the demographic downturn in birth rates during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was 'an expression of *populist* feminism', led by women in order to improve their quality of life.<sup>14</sup> In her study of gendered leisure activities in the Auckland

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<sup>9</sup> Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity* (Wellington: Allen and Unwin in association with the Port Nicholson Press, 1986), p. 211.

<sup>10</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society'.

<sup>11</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 264.

<sup>12</sup> Neill Atkinson, 'The Rise and Fall of Happy Homes, 1918 - 1935', in *Frontier of Dreams: The Story of New Zealand*, ed. by Bronwyn Dalley and Gavin McLean (Auckland: Hodder Moe, 2005), p. 267.

<sup>13</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 181 – 188.

<sup>14</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 186.

Domain from 1890 to 1940, Caroline Daley argues that women were increasingly involved in certain sports.<sup>15</sup> These histories frame this period as a time of social progression for women. However, they do not suggest that women were viewed equally with men in the early twentieth century. Rather, these historians approach gender issues with a focus on social advancement, particularly associated with government policy. Devanny and Lee's fiction is valuable in this context because their work reflects more emotive and lived understandings of gender, which provide a more nuanced framework through which to consider this period.

Other scholars view gender relations in this era from a different perspective to the historians above. These researchers suggest that despite increased equality in a number of areas, women were still expected to conform to the role of the wife and mother. Philippa Mein Smith and Jock Phillips, for instance, both point to the dominance of female domesticity in this period.<sup>16</sup> Mein Smith notes that the 'New Zealand Mum came into her own from the 1920s.'<sup>17</sup> She suggests that despite the changes to government policy, women's roles were predominantly focussed on the domestic sphere in this era. Similarly, Phillips asserts that by '1920 the ideal of the sentimental domestic family had been firmly established in New Zealand' and throughout the late 1920s and 1930s had 'become a monolithic reality'.<sup>18</sup> Both historians argue that the role of mother and nurturer are ideas

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<sup>15</sup> Caroline Daley, 'A Gendered Domain: Leisure in Auckland, 1890 – 1940', in *The Gendered Kiwi*, ed. by Caroline Daley and Deborah Montgomerie (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1999), pp. 87 – 112.

<sup>16</sup> Philippa Mein Smith, *A Concise History of New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 134 – 135, 140 – 141; Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male - A History*, Revised (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 225 – 234. Sir Frederic Truby King (1858 – 1938) was the founder of the Plunket Society in New Zealand and was the Director of Child Welfare in the Department of Health. For more information on King refer to Lloyd Chapman, *In A Strange Garden: The Life and Times of Truby King* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003). For more information on the Plunket Society refer to Linda Bryder, *A Voice for Mothers: The Plunket Society and Infant Welfare, 1907 - 2000* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Mein Smith, pp. 140 – 141.

<sup>18</sup> Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, p. 225.

strongly linked to the underlying philosophies of Dr Truby King and the development of the Plunket Society in the early twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> King emphasised the importance of the role of women as mothers, with much of his advice based on the assumption that women belonged exclusively in this position.<sup>20</sup> Barbara Brookes also highlights the significant impact that King's ideals regarding motherhood had on the social expectations placed on women in the 1930s.<sup>21</sup> She notes contemporaries believed that 'the nuclear family' effectively ensured 'the stability of the centre of New Zealand society.'<sup>22</sup> These histories suggest that, despite greater political freedom, the role of women in New Zealand society during the 1920s and 1930s was still relatively restricted.

Megan Hutching addresses the rigour these assumptions in her article 'Mothers of the World: Women, Peace and Arbitration in Early Twentieth-Century New Zealand.'<sup>23</sup> Hutching demonstrates that the role of women as mothers was continuously used to give weight to political movements related to women's rights. For example, she argues that women's suffrage groups, and later the arbitration movement, drew on this understanding of women's maternal instincts to gain support.<sup>24</sup> Hutching states that the ideology around nurturant motherhood 'had been internalized and was used quite unselfconsciously' by both women and men involved in these movements.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Raewyn Dalziel, also

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<sup>19</sup> Mein Smith, p. 135.

<sup>20</sup> Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, p. 224.

<sup>21</sup> Brookes, pp. 196 – 210.

<sup>22</sup> Brookes, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Megan Hutching, 'Mothers of the World: Women, Peace and Arbitration in Early Twentieth-Century New Zealand', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 27 (1993), 173 – 186.

<sup>24</sup> Hutching, pp. 173 – 175. Although, Hutching notes the arguments were used on the opposite side of both these issues as well.

<sup>25</sup> Hutching, p. 184.

argues that ‘the early success of New Zealand women in gaining political rights was closely related to their achievements in this role.’<sup>26</sup>

Devanny’s fiction is valuable to historians here because the complexities found within it relate to the divergent perspectives of many later historians. The radical encouragement Devanny gives her female characters to break the socially constructed ‘chains’ surrounding marriage in the majority of her novels is reflective of an increased feminist sensibility.<sup>27</sup> Yet, through her critique of these social conventions, Devanny also highlights the strength of the link between female identity and the role of the mother. These complexities are highlighted in the way Devanny critiques traditional understandings of the social roles of women in *The Butcher Shop*.<sup>28</sup>

The protagonist of *The Butcher Shop*, Margaret Messenger, marries her employer; a man who she believes she is in love with. Later in life Margaret discovers that while she respects her husband, she does not truly love him. Instead she falls in love and begins a relationship with one of her husband’s employees. Margaret soon realises that due to social conventions she cannot live with her husband and keep her lover. Even Margaret’s lover expects her to end the affair because of the importance to place first marriage and children. Margaret is enraged by the idea that as a wife and a mother she ought to sacrifice her own happiness:

You think that my married state gives my husband and my children the power of life and death over me. What am I, then? What am I in

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<sup>26</sup> Raewyn Dalziel, ‘The Colonial Helpmeet. Women’s Role and the Vote in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand’, *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 11 (1977), p. 113.

<sup>27</sup> Throughout *The Butcher Shop*, Devanny frequently uses the word ‘chained’ to describe wives’ relationship to their husbands.

<sup>28</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*.

your eyes, eh? A machine, just the female of the species to be caged up, a breeding animal denied even the right to choose my own mate!<sup>29</sup>

Devanny also consciously challenges the contemporary assumption that women should conform to the role of the mother earlier in the novel where Margaret considers motherhood after the birth of her first child:

Unconsciously she assumed the proper attitude towards parenthood; saw it in its right relation to all other things. The bringing forth of young she saw as awesome and wondrous, right enough; but since Nature in this made man its puppet, at one with the lowly worm, why regard it as the supreme achievement and worship at its shrine to the exclusion of all other interests? – as the woman of her world almost invariably did.<sup>30</sup>

Through her main character, Devanny is essentially attacking the contemporary popular public perception that the only female role in society is that of the wife and mother. *The Butcher Shop* presents the most direct challenge to social assumptions relating to the construction of female identity out of all of Devanny's novels. The banning of *The Butcher Shop* in New Zealand may have led Devanny to temper her radical beliefs in her later novels for the sake of sales. Nevertheless, the majority of her New Zealand novels continue to call for greater freedom for married women.

Devanny's 1932 novel, *Poor Swine*, also addressed the popular expectation of the day that considered the role of mother as the preeminent calling for all women. Lilian Cameron, the key protagonist in the novel is married to a weak man whose gambling and alcohol problems leaves the mining family in poor economic circumstances. Despite her husband's individual faults, Lilian blames social conventions for the position they find themselves in:

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<sup>29</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 120.

<sup>30</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, pp. 79 – 80.

“Neither of us chose it [marriage], Laurie. We’re just victims; of other people’s crimes. But the mother must always suffer more, Laurie, because she is at the mercy of the man. She has to take what is given her because she has no money and she has to look after the children. I’ve noticed, Laurie, that it is always the wife who goes without for the sake of the children.”<sup>31</sup>

In both *The Butcher Shop* and *Poor Swine*, Devanny creates heroines who seek lives beyond the traditional roles of women. Through the feminist sentiments expressed by the protagonists and the way in which Devanny uses plot to question repressive social conventions these novels highlight Devanny’s conviction that women needed a voice. Nevertheless, by the very presence of such social critiques, which rail at the restricted lives and limited choices of many women, these works also point to the dominance of the domestic role of women in society. Through Devanny’s layered and complex critique of social norms, her fiction allows historians to explore the nuanced positions of women in the 1920s. This offers an insight into the richness of life in early twentieth century New Zealand that is often lacking in traditional sources.

The fiction of Devanny and Lee also provides a window through which historians are able to examine the assumptions and attitudes surrounding the male breadwinning ideology. Devanny’s critique of the dependency women have on men serves as an example of this. This problem of financial dependence had been discussed by women’s groups as early as the 1890s.<sup>32</sup> Margaret Sievwright, Kate Sheppard, and other members of the National Council of Women of New Zealand had debated the problems regarding married women’s economic dependency at their 1896 Council conference.<sup>33</sup> Sheppard addressed this issue again in an article

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<sup>31</sup> Jean Devanny, *Poor Swine* (London: Duckworth, 1932), p. 230.

<sup>32</sup> Devaliant, pp. 152 – 155.

<sup>33</sup> Devaliant, pp. 152 – 155.

published in 1914.<sup>34</sup> While the challenge to economic dependence in Devanny's novels differs from these earlier debates in the sense that Devanny argued that married women ought to be able to earn an independent wage from outside sources rather than have their husbands provide a fixed income by law, her critique of the economic position of women within marriage was drawn from similar arguments. Devanny's critiques challenge a number of gender assumptions present in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand.

In Devanny's third novel, *Dawn Beloved*, the protagonist, Dawn Devoy is entirely dependent on her husband; a common situation for a majority of Devanny's protagonists. The miners' salary her husband receives is fairly low, therefore Dawn has to economise carefully. Shortly after their marriage, she discovers that in the mining community 'it was quite the custom for the wife to go without so that the husband might have his fill'; something Dawn is expected to do herself.<sup>35</sup> This depiction of the role of husbands and wives in a working class community implies that men were viewed as the breadwinners within these communities. Thus, women were almost entirely dependent upon their husbands. Devanny suggests that in the eyes of society, after marriage women simply became the property of their husbands rather than individuals.<sup>36</sup> During the first World War, employment opportunities for women increased substantially.<sup>37</sup> However, after the end of the war, women were encouraged to marry and move from paid employment to domestic activities.<sup>38</sup> The introduction of a family wage and allowance emphasised the assumption of some later historians that men were

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<sup>34</sup> Sheppard, p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> Jean Devanny, *Dawn Beloved* (London: Duckworth, 1928), p. 135.

<sup>36</sup> Heather Roberts, 'Introduction to the Butcher Shop', in *The Butcher Shop* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1981), p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> Atkinson, p. 264; Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 265.

<sup>38</sup> Tim Frank, 'Bread Queues and Breadwinners: Gender in the 1930s', in *The Gendered Kiwi*, ed. by Caroline Daley and Deborah Montgomerie (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1999), p. 113.



the family breadwinners.<sup>39</sup> Writing on the male breadwinner and the development of women's economic citizenship, Melanie Nolan notes that there was a growth in employment opportunities for non-married women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four in the 1920s.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, many women married, and once married, women were expected to stay in the home due to social pressures that emphasised the importance of family and motherhood.<sup>41</sup>

The contradictory nature of Devanny's fiction reflects these complex attitudes towards women's dependence on men during the 1920s. Devanny challenges the assumption that wives should be content to be economically dependent on their husbands in a number of her novels. For example, in *The Butcher Shop* the dependent economic position of women is represented as a leading factor in why, according to Devanny, women 'are an inferior race, [...] only society's playthings'.<sup>42</sup> In *Poor Swine*, the protagonist, Lilian Cameron, has to prostitute herself after her husband ceases to give her money because of her reliance on her husband's income. Yet, significantly, a number of Devanny's protagonists, such as Dawn Devoy in *Dawn Beloved* and Lilian Cameron, are able to escape their poor circumstances by marrying or running away with a wealthy man. Devanny's critique of gendered dependency reflects the prevalence of the male breadwinning ideology in the 1920s, while also furthering her feminist agenda by encouraging her heroines to break free from the restrictions of the domestic role. However, it has to be said that here her novels become even more

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<sup>39</sup> For more information on policies see Maureen Baker, 'Family Welfare - Welfare, Work and Families, 1918-1945', *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2011  
<<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/family-welfare/3>> [accessed 28 January 2013]; Nolan, p. 199.

<sup>40</sup> Nolan, p. 215.

<sup>41</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 263; Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, p. 225.

<sup>42</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 134.

contradictory, with frequent recourse to the plot device of the wiser, older, wealthier lover as both educator and salvation.

John A. Lee's novel, *Children of the Poor*, also addresses the dominance of the male breadwinner ideology. The protagonist of the novel, Albany Porcello, is forced out into the work force at an early age to help support his family. Albany's father had left the family when he was still a baby, thus Albany, his older sister, Rose, and his little brother relied solely upon their mother. Albany's mother does her best to feed and shelter the children, but her employment is not steady and there are not many opportunities for her to gain fixed and well-paid employment. The family is forced to live in extreme poverty, reliant on charitable aid to survive. Rose becomes a prostitute because this is the only employment that offers a small income.<sup>43</sup> However, the family is still largely dependent on Albany earnings.<sup>44</sup> Even as a young boy, Albany has far greater employment opportunities than his mother and sister. Thus, *Children of the Poor* interrogates the gendered conflicts relative to the common role of the male breadwinner in 1930s New Zealand. The novel, although set in the 1890s, was written in the 1930s, after Lee lived through the depression. Given the period in which the novel is set it can be argued that Lee's depiction of male breadwinning largely relates to 1890s New Zealand society. However, it would be wrong to assume that it did not represent the social expectations present in the 1930s as well. *Children of the Poor* is largely a social commentary on the poverty that existed in New Zealand during the 1930s. The position of women in society addressed in Lee's novel illustrate that the male breadwinning ideology was an issue of some

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<sup>43</sup> John A. Lee, *Children of the Poor*, 1986 ed. (Christchurch: Whitcoulls Publishers, 1934), pp. 6, 123 – 128.

<sup>44</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 167.

consideration New Zealand society throughout the early twentieth century.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, Lee's novels are valuable to historians examining the gendered scripts attached to male breadwinning ideology in this period.

The complexities surrounding gender relations can be found in historical scholarship as well. For example, Barbara Brookes notes that the 'nineteenth-century ideal of woman as the 'colonial helpmeet' was reinforced in the twentieth century by the creation of the welfare state.'<sup>46</sup> She argues that an emphasis on women as the wife and mother in the 1930s meant that men were viewed as the primary breadwinners.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, Tim Frank suggests that the male breadwinning ideology underwent a shift in the 1930s.<sup>48</sup> Frank argues that despite the gendered nature of the workforce and the Labour Government policies, the Depression caused families to seek out practical ways of gaining money outside of simply male employment. Albany's mother and sister's struggle to find work in Lee's *Children of the Poor* is in many ways a reminder that women from families in lower socio-economic positions regularly sought employment to supplement the family income. Yet, in his writing, Lee points out that when family circumstances were dire enough for women to break with social expectations, they nevertheless remained marginalised due to low employment opportunities caused by the strength of the male breadwinning ideology. Such depictions reflect the complexities surrounding gender expectations in the early twentieth century. Devanny and Lee's novels suggest that in many ways women in the 1920s and 1930s sought to challenge the male breadwinning ideology, whether directly, as seen in Devanny's radical critique of the women's economic dependence, or

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<sup>45</sup> Brookes.

<sup>46</sup> Brookes, p. 197.

<sup>47</sup> Phillips, *A Man's Country?*, pp. 226 – 227.

<sup>48</sup> Frank, p. 114.

through the influence of economic necessity suggested within Lee's *Children of the Poor*. Yet, these novels also highlight a continued perception of women as fundamentally domesticated.

Devanny's novels not only offer ways to explore attitudes towards male breadwinning and assumptions surrounding female identity, but they simultaneously highlight how these aspects of society were repressive for women. In doing so, the novels provide contemporary commentaries on a number of social issues, particularly the problems caused by the prevalence of restrictive puritanism. While the majority of Devanny's protagonists are able to escape their repressive marriages, the challenges they face in doing so demonstrate the strength of conventions used to make the individual conform to social norms. Devanny's novels show that the majority of women living in *Pākehā* communities were very much expected to marry and stay married in 1920s and early 1930s New Zealand, not only due to economic dependence, but because of the puritanical and repressive values that were dominant during the period. In Devanny's novels these strong social values are highlighted through the reaction of many of her characters to pregnancy outside of wedlock.<sup>49</sup>

The protagonist of *Poor Swine*, Lilian Cameron, and one of the central characters in Devanny's *Riven*, Fay, provide examples of the social pressures on pregnant women to marry. *Poor Swine* opens with Lilian pregnant to a man out of wedlock, whom she has ceased to love. Her mother, Mrs Sweet, is furious when she discovers this, and lashes out:<sup>50</sup>

“She's brought disgrace on us all” she clamoured with gusty breath, as she fought to push him from where his body hid Lilian. And it flashed

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<sup>49</sup> They are also highlighted through critiques of extra-martials such as Margaret's in *The Butcher Shop* and Lilian Cameron's in *Poor Swine*.

<sup>50</sup> Lilian's maiden name is Sweet.

through the girl's mind that the only time she had seen her mother oppose her father was to get at her child to rend her.

The response from Lilian's mother to the discovery of her pregnancy highlights the fear of social isolation, and the pressure, that would have been placed on women in a similar situation during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>51</sup> Fay, too, falls pregnant outside of wedlock. The majority of the characters in *Riven* react in a similar way to Mrs Sweet. While not as angry, they are described as fundamentally shocked and expect Fay to marry directly after the discovery. Only Fay's mother, Marigold, challenges these views. For Marigold, a life permanently linked to a weak man is a much worse fate than enduring the social ostracism passed on those who bear a child outside of wedlock.<sup>52</sup> Marigold's husband, Justus, 'the personification of the mass conventions of the world', argues that Fay ought to marry. His debate with Marigold is used by Devanny to highlight the absurdity of traditional 'moralist' arguments surrounding marriage:

"And what is it, Justus, that is so much more important involved here than my feelings or Fay's?"

"Why, morality in general." Justus began to rant. "Our – our honour!" He felt dreadfully old-fashioned to have used that word, and blushed for it. "The good of society as a whole. You can't have -"

"Wait, Justus. What is this society you mention? Is Fay not a part of it? Am I not a part of it?"

"Why – er – I suppose so." Justus again disconcerted. He breathed heavily a few times and sought justification in the surrounding bushes. He knew she was wrong, of course. It was just the way she put it.

"How can the ruin of Fay's life benefit society, Justus? Is society a monstrous cannibal that exists by devouring its own young?"<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>For more on the social stigma attached to unmarried motherhood see Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 183.

<sup>52</sup>Caroline Daley, *Girls & Women, Men & Boys: Gender in Taradale 1886 - 1930* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1999), p. 20.

<sup>53</sup>Jean Devanny, *Riven* (London: Duckworth, 1929), p. 201.

Fay's situation highlights two aspects of 1920s and early 1930s social conventions attached to the role of women. First, pregnancy outside of marriage brought with it social shame, thus those who fell pregnant were expected to marry. Secondly, that marriage was regarded as 'irrevocable' in this period: once married, men and women were expected to stay married.<sup>54</sup> Devanny challenges these social conventions through the voices of her female protagonists, but her critiques demonstrate that these social controls were well entrenched in the period she is writing. In her history on gender relations in Taradale from 1886 to 1930, Caroline Daley found evidence of a similar contemporary attitude towards pregnancy out of wedlock to that reflected in Devanny's fiction.<sup>55</sup> Daley argues that for those women who had illegitimate children out of wedlock, life 'could be very unpleasant', thus women who fell pregnant outside of marriage tried to marry.<sup>56</sup>

The discussions surrounding Lilian and Fay's pregnancies in Devanny's novels also reveal dominant responses to premarital sex. James Belich argues that premarital sex with husbands-to-be was met with 'an unspoken tolerance' in the community in the early twentieth century.<sup>57</sup> Certainly, premarital sex occurred in this period; this is clear both from the depictions of pregnancy outside of wedlock present in Devanny's novels as well as the statistical evidence.<sup>58</sup> Yet, pre-marital sex was *only* ignored by the community if it ended in marriage, otherwise the mother faced social ostracism. In *Riven*, after Marigold has informed Justus that she does not believe Fay should marry the father of her child, Justus retorts:

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<sup>54</sup> Devanny, *Riven*, p. 107.

<sup>55</sup> Daley, *Girls & Women, Men & Boys: Gender in Taradale 1886 - 1930*.

<sup>56</sup> Daley, *Girls & Women, Men & Boys: Gender in Taradale 1886 - 1930*, p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 187.

<sup>58</sup> Belich quotes statistics which imply that 'one-third of legitimate first births of women under the age of 30 [...] took place within seven months of the marriage' in 1913. Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 187.

“Damn it all, would you see the girl disgraced for life?”<sup>59</sup> It is within these condemning social statements that Devanny at once explores and comments on the current social pressures that were used to control such ‘problems.’

Devanny’s critique of social controls and the pressure placed on women to conform to the role of the wife and the mother, are used to highlight how, in her opinion, women in contemporary society were repressed in a number of ways. Economic dependence limited personal freedom, but the dominance of this understanding of female identity also limited women’s knowledge of, and control over, their own bodies. This can be seen through the discussions surrounding birth control and family size in Devanny’s *Poor Swine*, *Lenore Divine*, and *Riven* and Lee’s *Children of the Poor*. Where knowledge is available to these characters, it is either not used due to expense or is frowned upon by male characters. In *Poor Swine*, Lilian Cameron, has the following conversation with her local doctor:

“Do you believe in the workers having big families?”

He thrust both hands into his pockets and regarded her. For once he did not tug at his cap.

“No, I don’t” – bluntly.

“Well, then, isn’t it your duty to tell them – ?”

“No. If I told them I should go to jail. The law only allows me to protect the women whose life would be endangered.”<sup>60</sup>

New Zealand law in the early twentieth century only allowed doctors to perform abortions if the pregnancy would endanger the mother’s life, whereas there was no law regarding advice about contraception.<sup>61</sup> The fact that contraception is not discussed raises questions about how accessible contraceptive procedures were in

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<sup>59</sup> Devanny, *Riven*, p. 201.

<sup>60</sup> Devanny, *Poor Swine*, pp. 82 – 83.

<sup>61</sup> Brookes, pp. 199, 201.

early twentieth New Zealand, particularly for those in lower socio-economic situations. Only Flora Burke from *Bushman Burke* and Margaret from *The Butcher Shop* hint at the use of contraceptives. It is significant that both these characters are considered member of an upper middle class in contrast to Devanny's other protagonists. Importantly, both Flora and Margaret's husbands are shocked by the suggestion that they use contraception.<sup>62</sup> For characters from working class communities, such as Lilian Cameron in *Poor Swine* and the miners' wives in *Dawn Beloved*, there is no way of limiting family size other than through abortions conducted at home.<sup>63</sup> Even though the doctor in *Poor Swine* is aware that working classes families suffered due to the large amount of children reliant on small incomes, he is unwilling to discuss how women and men are able to control family size.

John A. Lee also highlights the problem pregnancy posed to working class women in *Children of the Poor*. Albany Porcello's mother falls pregnant in the novel. She is already trying, but failing, to support three children and struggles to feed the baby as well.<sup>64</sup> While she loves the child, it is almost a relief when the baby dies in her cot one night.<sup>65</sup> In the opening pages, Lee foreshadows this event by writing of Albany's mother as 'too poor to utilize the scientific knowledge available to the clergyman's wife'.<sup>66</sup> However, to feed her children she must sell herself and risk becoming pregnant.<sup>67</sup> Such depictions of birth control present in the novels of Devanny and Lee connect to the argument made by later historians, including Barbara Brookes and James Belich, that various contraceptives were not

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<sup>62</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 83; Jean Devanny, *Bushman Burke* (London: Duckworth, 1930), pp. 129 – 130. Please note that class will be addressed later on within this thesis.

<sup>63</sup> Devanny, *Dawn Beloved*, pp. 216 – 218. Dawn discusses how some of the miners force themselves on their wives even when this is unwanted.

<sup>64</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, pp. 94 – 101.

<sup>65</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 101.

<sup>66</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 6.



used by the majority of New Zealand society in the 1920s and 1930s despite being available.<sup>68</sup>

The sentiments surrounding birth control in Devanny's fiction relate to Brookes' argument that birth control was frowned upon in New Zealand society because it challenged the ideals of motherhood.<sup>69</sup> Yet, the depictions of abortion found in Devanny's novels demonstrate a much more complex and contradictory understanding of the ideals surrounding motherhood. Abortion is directly addressed in two of Devanny's novels, *Lenore Divine* and *Riven*. A central character in *Lenore Divine*, Alle Wishart, falls pregnant to a man who is not her husband. Terrified she will be found out, Alle appeals to a 'Jazz Girl', Jo Riley, to help her have an abortion. Alle first takes oral powder to terminate the pregnancy but this proves to be unsuccessful:

Sickening disappointment was the girl's portion during the next few weeks. Again and again she appealed to Jo Riley, but all her efforts to free herself were unsuccessful. Physically she was looking a wreck.<sup>70</sup>

After the powder fails, Alle is given the name of a back street abortionist. Devanny, herself, had an abortion and an unpublished piece of autobiographical writing suggests that she knew a number of other women who did so as well.<sup>71</sup> In reference to her time in Puponga, Devanny wrote;

An unwanted pregnancy would mean fearful darting in and out of the homes of friends in search of ways and means of getting rid of it. Women made themselves ill by drinking turpentine, dosing themselves with Epsom salts.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Brookes, p. 200; Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 183.

<sup>69</sup> Brookes, p. 209.

<sup>70</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 140.

<sup>71</sup> Jean Devanny, *Point of Departure: The Autobiography of Jean Devanny*, ed. Carole Ferrier (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1986), p. 77; Moffat, 'Explanatory Notes', *Lenore Divine*, pp. 245 – 246.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary*, p. 18.

Fay from *Riven* also tries to terminate her pregnancy, but, unlike Alle, Fay is successful. Such depictions reinforce Erik Olssen's statement that throughout the 1920s 'abortion became a minor trade.'<sup>73</sup> The strong social pressure to marry and have legitimate children meant that those who broke with social conventions invariably attempted to get rid of the evidence.<sup>74</sup> Given that abortions were generally performed at home throughout the 1920s and 1930s due to the New Zealand abortion laws, these procedures carried risks.<sup>75</sup> Both Alle and Fay are described as being seriously ill after their attempts to abort their pregnancies.

Significantly, unlike Devanny and the character from *Riven*, Fay, Alle in *Lenore Divine* never goes through with the abortion after the powder given to her by Jo Riley fails to work. The protagonist of the novel, Lenore, persuades Alle to keep the child instead. This is important given the way that Devanny challenges the traditional role of women as the wife and mother in *The Butcher Shop* and *Poor Swine*.<sup>76</sup> In *Lenore Divine* motherhood is presented by Devanny as sacred. Directly after the birth of her child, Alle 'sobbed and sobbed' and does not want to see the child.<sup>77</sup> However, as soon as she does see the child, her reaction rapidly changes: "My baby! Give it me, Len." She cuddled it to her, pressed her pale lips to its head and wept. Just clean, sweet, womanly tears of joy in motherhood'.<sup>78</sup>

Through their multidimensional and sometimes contradictory representations of the responses of characters to unwanted pregnancies Devanny's novels reveal the complexities accompanying the intersection between social

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<sup>73</sup> Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 263.

<sup>74</sup> For more information on abortion in New Zealand during the early twentieth century refer to Brookes.

<sup>75</sup> Brookes, p. 198.

<sup>76</sup> See earlier in the chapter.

<sup>77</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 166.

<sup>78</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 166.

pressure, emotional desire and economic circumstances faced by women living in early twentieth century New Zealand. Thus, these novels provide a layered social commentary on contemporary issues that were closely linked to understandings of gender.

Despite Devanny's challenge to the contemporary social conventions and the tradition role of women, her novels nevertheless reflect a range of predominant social values of the day. All of Devanny's female protagonists are strong and independent (mentally and emotionally, but not financially), yet they are all educated by men, never by women or completely by themselves. The presence of these visionary men, whose socialist ideology is linked to a conviction that gender as well as class hierarchies need to be overturned, both furthers Devanny's feminist agenda and curiously suggests that women rely on masculine wisdom for enlightenment. Margaret Messenger from *The Butcher Shop* is described as having a love of reading from childhood, but she mostly reads popular novels. It is through reading her husband's collection of books and discussions with Jimmy Tutaki, an educated man, that Margaret really becomes interested in 'highbrow' literature and developing a more sophisticated understanding of the world. She is also taught about socialism from an educated male, Ian Longstair. Thus, despite Margaret's natural intelligence, and openness to socialism noted in earlier sections of the novel, she is initially taught the finer points of the ideology by a man. This occurs throughout the majority of Devanny's fiction, regardless of whether the female characters are learning about culture or scientific socialism.

Similarly, in *Poor Swine*, Lilian is educated by the eccentric intellectual aristocrat, and drunken, Julian Greville. Dawn Devoy is first introduced to

socialism by her brother and encouraged by Duke, a central character in the novel. Even Lenore Divine, who is arguably Devanny's strongest female character in regard to self-education and intelligence, forms many of her opinions through debate with the Labour Party politician, Lafe Osgood. These ambiguities in Devanny's novels are significant because through their intricacies they highlight the nuances surrounding understandings of gender and female identity in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand.

Gender issues present in early twentieth century are further explored in Devanny's fiction through the way in which she juxtaposes the 'Natural Woman' with the figure of the 'Weak Woman', such as Miette Longstair from *The Butcher Shop*, Devanny's fiction offers various contradictions. Based on her radical critique of the puritanical conventions that hold women to an inferior social position, Devanny pushed for further female liberation. However, the inherent qualities that she imbues in a number of her characters imply that only a certain type of woman ought to find access to a higher social standing, with women such as Miette doomed because of her 'type': weak, promiscuous, intellectually shallow (p. 145).<sup>79</sup> One example of the type of woman who deserves liberation is presented by Devanny in the novel *Poor Swine*. The protagonist, Lilian Cameron, develops from a naïve, 'Innocent' girl to a 'Natural Woman' with an enlightened understating of the flawed nature of conventional social values. Lilian comes from a working class background, but has a natural understanding and love for culture. Through the character of Lilian, Devanny raises questions about the restrictive social and economic conditions that generally held working class women in a position of poverty and cultural ignorance. At first it may appear that

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<sup>79</sup> Heather Roberts, 'Devanny, Jean - Biography', *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2010 <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/4d13/1>> [accessed 14 February 2012].

Lilian's transformation from ignorance to greater intellectuality and cultural understanding indicates that working class women were all capable of developing under the right circumstances. However, Lilian is depicted as unique in this sense. She has natural qualities, in particular a love of literature and an appreciation of music, which enable and entitle her to rise above her social position, qualities that a number of the other working class women do not possess like the distasteful Mrs Jackson in the same novel.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the capability to rise within Devanny's imagined cultural hierarchy is not only connected with a further education, but also through the possession of the inherent traits of the 'Natural Woman.' Indeed, despite her radicalism, Devanny's fiction retains in its commentary dominant discourses present in her social context. The complex and sometimes contradictory nature of Devanny's depictions of, and challenge to, gender roles in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand provides historians with a nuanced textual source that enables various contemporary ideas to be teased out and examined.

The novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee provide valuable insights regarding the role of women in New Zealand during the 1920s and 1930s. Historians have debated this issue, with some framing their discussion of issues to do with women within a broader narrative of progress and increased gender equality, and others contending that the period is one in which women's roles remained largely domesticated. Devanny's fiction, in particular, is useful because it does not allow for simple binaries. In many ways she epitomises a highly radicalised and progressive feminist sensibility, but her fiction also highlights the lived realities that women struggled against. Her critique of gendered economic

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<sup>80</sup> Devanny, *Poor Swine*, pp. 43 – 46.

dependence rails against the breadwinning ideology. Similarly, John A. Lee's focus on class and poverty in *Children of the Poor* offers a discussion of alternative sources of income for households throughout the 1930s. Devanny and Lee both link male breadwinning to entrenched assumptions about female identity. In challenging the traditional roles of women, Devanny's novels engage with criticism about the cult of domesticity in the 1920s and 1930s. She points out that women were largely forced to conform to the role of the wife and mother due to financial dependence and because of the pressures exerted by contemporary puritanical social conventions. Devanny's novels challenge prevalent contemporary notions about the fixed roles of women at the time. Her heroines are neither completely domesticated, or completely free, but navigate a complex web of social restrictions and responsibilities in their quest to be seen as more than simply 'gilded' ornament[s]' trapped in a patriarchal, capitalist cage.

## Chapter Three

### The 'Barbarian': Jean Devanny's Radical Representations of Race

Strange! The pride of the barbarian. He lost himself for a moment or two in mystified admiration of this man, almost wholly white, yet clinging to, and being proudest of, the slight strain of the backward race. Taipo thought then it was no wonder the Maori blood permeated the whole of New Zealand society, from the highest to the lowest.

Jean Devanny, *Bushman Burke*<sup>1</sup>

Jean Devanny's New Zealand based novels offer various commentaries regarding the relationship between Māori and Pākehā in early twentieth century New Zealand. The myth of good race relations in early twentieth century New Zealand has been steadily deconstructed by historians in recent decades.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, this conception of good race relations was a dominant part of contemporary discourses surrounding Pākehā attitudes towards Māori. Devanny's fiction is valuable to historians because it offers another window through which to examine Pākehā attitudes towards Māori in the 1920s and late 1930s. This chapter is solely focussed on the fiction written by Devanny because John A. Lee's novels do not contain Māori characters.<sup>3</sup> Devanny's use of Māori characters is unique compared to the way that other New Zealand authors wrote about Māori in early twentieth century novels.<sup>4</sup> The love affair between Lenore Divine and Kowhatu Ngatoro, which forms the central romantic narrative throughout *Lenore Divine*, is considered to be the first example of a bi-racial relationship between a Māori man and a Pākehā woman in New Zealand literature.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Devanny, *Bushman Burke* (London: Duckworth, 1930), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou*, pp. 191-194; Aroha Harris, *Forty Years of Maori Protest* (Wellington: Huia, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> This in itself speaks to Pākehā attitudes towards Māori.

<sup>4</sup> Kirstine Moffat, 'Introduction to Lenore Divine', in *Lenore Divine* (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), pp. ix – lvi (p. xxxvii).

<sup>5</sup> Moffat, 'Introduction to Lenore Divine', p. xxxvii.

Devanny's novels were also radical for her time because her Māori characters are individual figures with agency, depicted as proud of their heritage, rather than simply essentialised 'clichés.'<sup>6</sup> Through her radical construction of Māori characters Devanny's fiction engages with contemporary racial tensions. She places an emphasis on the need for racial equality and in doing so demonstrates that the relationships between Māori and Pākehā in early twentieth century New Zealand were more than simply problematic. Devanny further critiques racist sentiment through her novels by attaching this attitude to her 'weak' characters, such as Miette Longstair from *The Butcher Shop*.

Despite the radical representation of Māori within Devanny's novels her work draws from a number of race related cultural assumptions, particularly in regard to an admiration for Māori who conformed to European lifestyles.<sup>7</sup> Thus, her novels represent both a movement away from nineteenth century stereotypes of race as well as demonstrate the ingrained nature of a number of colonial 'clichés.' Through a critique of the relationship between Māori and Pākehā characters Devanny's fiction reveals additional layers surrounding attitudes towards race relations in this period. Because Devanny is a Pākehā writer, her novels, and therefore this chapter deals only with Pākehā understandings of the relationship between Māori and Pākehā rather than the ways in which Māori understood similar cultural interactions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Moffat, 'Introduction to Lenore Divine', p. xxxvi.

<sup>7</sup> This assumption that Māori ought to conform to a European style of living was prominent in discourses throughout the twentieth century. For example, this attitude can be found in the 'Hunn Report'. J. K. Hunn, *Report on Department of Maori Affairs with Statistical Supplement* (Wellington: R. E. Owen, Government Printer, 1961), pp. 25, 36.

<sup>8</sup> Issues regarding the interpretation of indigenous knowledge relevant to historical and cultural representation have been examined at length by multiple authors. For further discussion see Linda Tuiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin, London and New York: Otago University Press / Zed, 1999), pp. 31-33, Monty Soutar, 'A Framework for Analyzing Written Iwi Histories', *He Pukenga Korero*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1998), pp. 43-57; Nepia



Romantic myths about the supposed equality between Māori and Pākehā were frequently considered in early twentieth century New Zealand. This myth was constructed from a number of cultural assumptions present in the nineteenth century. These were based on contemporary theories linked to the extinction of the Māori race, the notion of ‘black Britons’ and the argument that Māori had strong ancestral ties to Europeans.<sup>9</sup> Despite the ways in which these discourses were used to develop the myth of good race relations, they were all founded on an underlying belief in European cultural superiority. These myths of racial equality continued in early twentieth century New Zealand.

The myth of racial equality can be found in a variety of contemporary sources. In 1901, Kate Sheppard wrote that ‘Maori and pakeha have become one people, under one Sovereign and one Parliament, glorying alike in the one title of ‘New Zealander.’<sup>10</sup> In 1906 the *New Zealand Herald* proclaimed that in New Zealand ‘for the first time, the savage man was treated as one who had some of the natural rights of property’ and that, therefore, the colony ‘was founded on a great and novel experiment.’<sup>11</sup> Other newspaper reports from the 1920s also

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Mahuika, ‘Closing the Gaps: From Postcolonialism to Kaupapa Maori and Beyond’, *The New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 45, no. 1, (2011), pp. 15-32.

<sup>9</sup> The view that Maori were a dying race was addressed by various commentators in and beyond the nineteenth century; see for instance Alfred K. Newman, ‘A study of the causes leading to the extinction of the Maori.’ *Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 14, (1881), pp. 58-77; and also for a commentary on the literature see Jane Stafford and Mark Williams, eds., ‘Smoothing the Pillow of the Dying Race: A. A. Grace’, in *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature 1872-1914* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), pp. 110-141. Theories of Aryan origins and the notion of Maori as ‘Black Britons’ had been espoused in the work of James Cowan, *The Maoris of New Zealand* (Wellington: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1910), p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart: New Zealand’s Search for National Identity* (Wellington: Allen and Unwin in association with the Port Nicholson Press, 1986), p. 204.

<sup>11</sup> Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*, p. 200. In his discussion on this report, Sinclair notes that the remained of the report reflects negative stereotypical depictions of Māori, thus it does not depict equality but rather reflects an established myth.

espoused powerful discourses about equality.<sup>12</sup> In 1924, one commentator in the *Auckland Star* opined that:

The respect and consideration which we habitually show the Maori is due entirely to our experience of their admirable personal and racial qualities, and the social and political status accorded to them by us is a tribute that we spontaneously and naturally pay to men and women who have proved their fitness and worthiness to live side by side with us on terms of absolute equality.<sup>13</sup>

The myth of equality, as James Belich notes, was supported by the ‘theoretical’ rights given to Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840.<sup>14</sup> This view was further reinforced by the Māori Representation Act of 1867, which established four Māori seats in Parliament, and emphasised discourses of comradeship in arms that was said to have developed during the First World War.<sup>15</sup> The creation of the Māori Battalion and the newspaper reports of the bravery of both Māori and Pākehā troops served to construct a sense of racial and national unity.<sup>16</sup>

The developing myth of equality, then, was born out of the idea that Māori were more amenable to assimilationist agendas still at work in contemporary ideas that continued to note the importance of the ‘civilizing’ mission.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, Māori were thought of by Pākehā in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as more highly civilised than the Aboriginals of Australia and First Nations peoples

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Pakeha Treatment of Maoris’, *New Zealand Truth*, 25 July 1929, p. 6. This report goes on to discuss the civil and social inequality between Māori and Pākehā highlighted to the House of Representatives by Sir Apirana Ngata (1874 – 1950) in 1929. Yet, the report demonstrates that the myth of equality was promulgated by some living in early twentieth century New Zealand. Sir Apirana Ngata was an influence Māori politician and secretary and organiser of the Young Māori Party. For more on Sir Apirana Ngata see M. P. K. Sorrenson, ‘Ngata, Apirana Turupa’, *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2012 <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/3n5/ngata-apirana-turupa>> [accessed 7 January 2013].

<sup>13</sup> ‘Maori and Pakeha’, *AS*, 17 November 1927, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland: The Penguin Press, 2001), p. 191.

<sup>15</sup> Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 332.

<sup>16</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 211 – 212; Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*, pp. 205 – 207.

<sup>17</sup> Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*, p. 197.

in Canada.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Māori were considered to be more fitting for assimilation than natives encounter in other colonial spaces.<sup>19</sup> According to one commentator in the *Auckland Star* (1924), Māori were viewed as the ‘highest type of native ever known.’<sup>20</sup> Some argued that Māori were of European descent. Edward Tregear, for instance, published *The Aryan Maori* in 1885 espousing this theory.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Te Rangi Hiroa (Sir Peter Buck) made a similar claim; asserting that in ‘the opinion of anthropologists [...] the Polynesians are largely of Caucasian origin.’<sup>22</sup>

James Belich notes that contemporary Pākehā society depicted the relations between Māori and Pākehā as fairly handed on the part of Pākehā New Zealanders given the ‘enlightened’ nature of the ‘modern’ world.<sup>23</sup> Belich asserts that this myth of a ‘racial utopia joined the socially and morally harmonious “tight society”, the virtuous social laboratory and the classless exemplary paradise.’<sup>24</sup>

This myth has been largely deconstructed by historians writing in the late twentieth century. However, some have continued to stress the importance of good race relations in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand.<sup>25</sup> For example, James Belich argues that greater equality between Māori and Pākehā was encouraged in

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<sup>18</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 190.

<sup>19</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 190.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Obligations to the Maoris’, *Auckland Star*, 27 December 1924, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Tregear, *The Aryan Maori* (Wellington: George Didsbury, Government Printer, 1885).

<sup>22</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 211. For more information on Peter Burke refer to M. P. K. Sorrenson, ‘Buck, Peter Henry’, *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2012 <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/3b54/buck-peter-henry>> [accessed 7 January 2013].

<sup>23</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 190 – 191.

<sup>24</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 190.

<sup>25</sup> Historians tend point to an increase in good race relations predominantly Māori and Pākehā. The Chinese, for example, also faced racial discrimination in this period. However, this was down played by contemporaries to fit into the myth of national social progression in the way prejudice against Māori was. For more information on the treatment of Chinese in late nineteenth and early twentieth century see James Ng, ‘The Sojourner Experience: The Cantonese Goldseekers in New Zealand, 1865 – 1901’, in *Unfolding History, Evolving Identity: The Chinese in New Zealand*, ed. by Manying Ip (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003), pp. 5 - 30; Nigel Murphy, ‘Jo Lum v. The Attorney General: The Politics of Exclusion’, in *Unfolding History, Evolving Identity: The Chinese in New Zealand*, ed. by Manying Ip (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003), pp. 48 - 68.

the early twentieth century through the increased involvement of Māori in sport, particularly rugby, the ideology surrounding the Māori Battalion and the impact that the Young Māori Party had on government policies.<sup>26</sup> In his chapter on New Zealand society between 1918 and 1935, Neill Atkinson argues that the Reform Government of the 1920s ‘took the first, tentative steps towards setting long-standing Maori grievances.’<sup>27</sup> Michael King presents a similar narrative of progression through his discussion of the policies and programmes initiated by Apirana Ngata during the 1920s.<sup>28</sup> In ‘Between Two Worlds’ King argues that by the late 1920s ‘Pākehā politicians had become aware of the need to provide support for the growing Māori population.’<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, many historians also note that there continued to be racial disharmony in this period. King notes this discrimination as particularly evident in a discussion of land ownership and the lack of an ‘adequate rehabilitation programme[s] for Māori servicemen’ in the early twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> Likewise Philippa Mein Smith demonstrates the depth of racial disharmony by highlighting the policy that rewarded returned Pākehā soldiers with Māori land.<sup>31</sup> Ranginui Walker, in particular, draws attention to inequality in the early twentieth century,

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<sup>26</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 212 – 215. The Young Māori Party was the name given to a group of individuals, mostly graduates of Te Aute College, who were involved in politics in the early twentieth century; it was not strictly a political party. King, p. 329. The three men mostly commonly associated with this party are Sir Apirana Ngata, Sir Peter Buck and Sir Maui Pomare (1876? – 1930). For more information on this group refer to Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Mātou: Struggle Without End* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 177 – 181; King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, pp. 329 – 336; Richard S. Hill, ‘State Authority, Indigenous Autonomy: Crown-Maori Relations in New Zealand/Aotearoa 1900-1950: The Young Maori Party’, *New Zealand Electronic Text Collection: Te Pūhikotuhi o Aotearoa*, 2004 <<http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-HillStat-t1-body-d2-d2.html>> [accessed 7 January 2013].

<sup>27</sup> Neill Atkinson, ‘The Rise and Fall of Happy Homes, 1918 - 1935’, in *Frontier of Dreams: The Story of New Zealand*, ed. by Bronwyn Dalley and Gavin McLean (Auckland: Hodder Moa, 2005), p. 259.

<sup>28</sup> King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, pp. 336 – 337.

<sup>29</sup> Michael King, ‘Between Two Worlds’, in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Rice, Second (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 292.

<sup>30</sup> King, ‘Between Two Worlds’, pp. 290, 303.

<sup>31</sup> Philippa Mein Smith, *A Concise History of New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 142, 147.

especially through his argument about Government control of Māori education and the suppression of Māori identity.<sup>32</sup> Walker argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ‘[s]chooling demanded cultural surrender, or at the very least suppression of one’s language and identity’, thus Pākehā education became an ‘area of cultural conflict’.<sup>33</sup> Through these histories it is evident that there were divergent and complex attitudes towards Māori in 1920s and 1930s Pākehā communities.

Some scholars have explored Pākehā attitudes by examining the depictions of Māori in *Man Alone*. Christina Stachurski is one such scholar. She argues that *Man Alone* reflects a number of Pākehā cultural assumptions about Māori. For example, she posits that the protagonist’s journey through the Rangipo desert implies ‘English mastery of a situation beyond New Zealand’s ‘native’ inhabitants.’<sup>34</sup> Paul Day also comments on Mulgan’s depiction of Māori in *Man Alone*.<sup>35</sup> Day argues that the ‘Arcadian quality’ associated with Rua’s Māori relatives ‘shows up the ugliness and barbarity of Stenning’s existence’.<sup>36</sup> This suggests that the Māori characters in *Man Alone* reflect cultural assumptions surrounding the idea of the ‘Noble Savage.’ Because *Man Alone* has been considered as ‘the fullest prose rendering of what the New Zealand twenties and thirties felt like’, the depictions of Māori in the novel have been used to

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<sup>32</sup> Ranginui Walker, pp. 138 – 139, 146 – 147.

<sup>33</sup> Ranginui Walker, p. 147.

<sup>34</sup> Christina Stachurski, *Reading Pakeha : Fiction and Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Cross/cultures (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 13. For further discussion concerning the racial undertones in *Man Alone* see Stachurski, pp. 30 – 34.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Day, ‘Mulgan’s *Man Alone*’, in *Critical Essays on the New Zealand Novel*, ed. by Cherry Hankin (Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books (NZ), 1976), pp. 60 – 72.

<sup>36</sup> Day, p. 64. Stenning and Rua are important characters in *Man Alone*. The protagonist of the novel, Johnson, is employed by Stenning. The two characters have a fight after Johnson has an affair with Stenning’s wife, Rua. Johnson ends up killing Stenning. He is then forced to run from the law, which leads to the famous scene in which Johnson struggles to journey through the Kaimanawa Ranges occurs.

investigate Pākehā attitudes towards Māori in this period.<sup>37</sup> However, Devanny's novels are, in many ways, a far richer source of information. Her texts directly and consciously critique racist attitudes in a way that Mulgan's novel does not. Devanny's fiction also bears the imprint of entrenched cultural assumptions about Māori culture that carry racial undertones. Through such ambiguities Devanny's works reveal a wider range of attitudes towards Māori than *Man Alone*, and once again provides a more deeply nuanced view of 1920s and 1930s New Zealand.

Māori, and half caste characters play central roles in three of Devanny's novels; Rangi and Beatrice Fell in *Bushman Burke*, Ngaire and Kowhatu Ngatoro in *Lenore Divine* and Jimmy Tutaki in *The Butcher Shop*. There are also a number of minor Māori characters within both *Lenore Divine* and *The Butcher Shop*. With the majority of *The Butcher Shop* set in on a sheep station, the Māori characters in the novel are considered in a rural context. In *Lenore Divine* and *Bushman Burke* Māori and half caste characters spend significant time in urban Wellington, although Ngaire and Kowhatu Ngatoro, own large sections of rural property. The brother and sister are well educated and come from a wealthy family of Waikato farmers descended from 'the great chiefs.'<sup>38</sup> They fit easily into the middle-class urban community of Wellington.<sup>39</sup> In *Bushman Burke*, the half caste brother and sister, Rangi and Beatrice Fell, are an important part of the upper-middle class group of friends who live the 'jazz age' life style.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Joan Stevens, *The New Zealand Novel 1860-1965* (Auckland: Reed Publishing (NZ), 1966), p. 62.

<sup>38</sup> Jean Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, ed. by Kirstine Moffat (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1999), p. 37.

<sup>40</sup> For more on Devanny's depiction of the 'jazz age' see Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', pp. xxxix – xli.

What is particularly significant about Devanny's fiction is her very radical treatment of Māori characters. The unique nature of the use of Māori characters is most clearly demonstrated in *Lenore Divine* through the central love affair between Lenore Divine, a Pākehā woman, and Kowhatu Ngatoro, a Māori man.<sup>41</sup> Love affairs between Māori and Pākehā characters were not an uncommon occurrence in New Zealand literature in the early twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> However, in earlier examples found in the fiction of other writers, these relationships only took place between Pākehā men and Māori women.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, these affairs tended to simply be just that: affairs that typically ended in death or desertion for the Māori maiden.<sup>44</sup> The fictional relationship and marriage between a Māori man and a Pākehā woman is not only radical in terms of early twentieth century literature, but also for the social context of the period given the prejudice surrounding inter-racial marriage. In her research on families of mixed-descent in Southern New Zealand during the late nineteenth century, Angela Wanhalla notes that 'across numerous frontiers, relationships between white men and indigenous women were tolerated' but 'for white women, the rules were clearly different.'<sup>45</sup> Despite this view, inter-racial marriages between Māori men and Pākehā women occurred frequently throughout the nineteenth century, but these were still often viewed negatively by both Māori and Pākehā.<sup>46</sup> The 1881 observation of South Island Native Officer Alexander Mackay is typical. He argued that Maori

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<sup>41</sup> Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', p. xxxvii.

<sup>42</sup> Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', p. xxxvii.

<sup>43</sup> Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', p. xxxvii.

<sup>44</sup> Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', p. xxxvii.

<sup>45</sup> Angela Wanhalla, *In/visible Sight: The Mixed-descent Families of Southern New Zealand* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2009), p. 65.

<sup>46</sup> For more information in inter-racial marriages in the nineteenth century see Trevor Bentley, *Pakeha Maori: The Extraordinary Story of the Europeans who Lived as Maori in Early New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 1999).

men's 'habits and modes of life preclude the possibility of intermarrying with Europeans'.<sup>47</sup>

*Lenore Divine* is radical not only because it is thought to be the first novel where a relationship between a Māori man and a Pākehā woman occurs in New Zealand fiction, but because the Māori character is presented as superior to Lenore's Pākehā 'husband'.<sup>48</sup> Not only is Kowhatu the man who Lenore comes to discover she is 'utterly in love with', but he is depicted as considerably more intelligent than Holly Virtue, Lenore's Pākehā 'husband'.<sup>49</sup> The differences between Holly and Kowhatu are highlighted through a scene in which Kowhatu has spent an evening talking of his love for Lenore when Holly returns to the house drunk.<sup>50</sup> Devanny writes that:

One leg of his good black suit was dusty and split at the knee. He looked apologetically at the two. "Lo, Len. 'Lo, Kowhatu." Neither answered. The Maori's face showed stern disgust and anger, and Lenore was looking from one to the other, sizing them up. Holly was crestfallen at their silence. He took off his hat and very deliberately tried to hang it on the door-knob, from which it fell again and again.<sup>51</sup>

The juxtaposition between the two men portrays Holly as the weak man who needs to be cared for, while highlighting Kowhatu as the strong masculine figure. Thus, Kowhatu is presented as the man best suited to the strong protagonist, Lenore. The differences between the two men serves as a plot device to justify Lenore's subsequent relationship with a man who is not the father of her child, and to validate her initial decision not to marry Holly. However, it also helps to

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<sup>47</sup> Wanhalla, p. 65.

<sup>48</sup> Lenore does not ever marry Holly Virtue because she believes that they should try living together first before committing to marriage. However, to avoid social stigma, Lenore and Holly pretend to be married. Thus, in the eyes of most of the characters, Lenore and Holly are husband and wife.

<sup>49</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 208.

<sup>50</sup> Drinking and particularly drunkenness is associated with the 'bad' characters in Devanny's novels, often causing disastrous situations. For more on drinking in Devanny's novels refer to Chapter Five, pp. 113 – 127 of this thesis.

<sup>51</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, pp. 93 – 94.



highlight the individual characteristics of Kowhatu. He is a character with depth rather than the static ‘noble savage’ figure that Māori characters often resembled in New Zealand literature during the early twentieth century.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, Devanny is radical compared to the majority of her contemporary authors given how she depicted Māori characters and the relationships between Māori and Pākehā.

Devanny also deliberately challenges preconceived Pākehā attitudes towards Māori by constructing Māori characters who are proud of their heritage. In *Lenore Divine* Ngaire is depicted as an ‘intelligent, educated girl’ with strong ties to her iwi.<sup>53</sup> She is also fiercely proud of ‘her great ancestry.’<sup>54</sup> In a conversation with Lenore, Ngaire says:

I have learned much, have been taught many beautiful things by your race but – I am the blood of the great chiefs, Lenore, and I work for a bald-headed, bow-legged old [Pākehā] fool that couldn’t fight his way out of a paper bag.<sup>55</sup>

Ngaire’s character also has strong links to the ‘Natural Woman’ figure, which places her on an equal level to Devanny’s Pākehā protagonists in her imagined social hierarchy.<sup>56</sup> Through these positive depictions of Māori characters, Devanny attempted to demonstrate that Māori (at least certain types of Māori) deserved to be treated equally. She also sought to challenge ingrained racist attitudes by directly critiquing these within her novels.

In Devanny’s novels, the ignorance of foreign and ‘weaker’ characters are also used to illustrate the negative ways in which she Devanny believed some

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<sup>52</sup> Moffat, ‘Introduction to *Lenore Divine*’, p. xxxvi.

<sup>53</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 41.

<sup>55</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 42.

<sup>56</sup> For more on the use of characters and Devanny’s imagined social hierarchy see Chapter One, pp. 41 – 45.

Pākehā treated Māori.<sup>57</sup> The English Mrs Curdy of *The Butcher Shop* is one such character. While discussing the employment of local Māori as farm hands and shearers with Margaret, Mrs Curdy suggests that the employment of Māori is wrong given the amount of unemployed white men. She concludes by saying ‘[y]ou are a funny people, you New Zealanders. You treat your natives as if they were white.’<sup>58</sup> Devanny then uses the naturally intelligent, and New Zealand born, Margaret to highlight Mrs Curdy’s absurd perspective. Margaret is said to grow cold and suspicious before quietly answering ‘[w]here is the difference?’<sup>59</sup>

The understanding of Māori as inferior to Pākehā based on racist values is similarly highlighted within *The Butcher Shop* by Miette Longstair’s initial treatment of Jimmy Tutaki. After arriving from England to live with the Messengers, Miette is met at the boat by Jimmy. She assumes that by patronising him, Jimmy will be appreciative because surely ‘she must appear in his eyes as a very fine white woman indeed to give such attention to [...] a common “coloured” man.’<sup>60</sup> Devanny takes this opportunity to comment on the condescending attitude embodied in Miette’s character:

Poor silly Miette had a lot to learn about New Zealanders and Maoris. She had to learn that the Maori, grand in the tradition of his race, stood equal with the average white man, and that in New Zealand racial distinctions between Hawaiki’s sons and the whites was non-existent.’<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For more information in how Devanny uses ‘weaker’ characters to critique what she believed to be the negative aspects of New Zealand society refer to Chapter One, pp. 41 - 45 of this thesis.

<sup>58</sup> Jean Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, ed. by Heather Roberts (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1981), p. 46.

<sup>59</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 46.

<sup>60</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 141.

<sup>61</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 141.

While this is an idealised view of the position of Māori within 1920s New Zealand, it does demonstrate the way in which Devanny attempted to address issues of racism within the novel: a theme which was to be continued in two of her later books, *Lenore Divine* and *Bushman Burke*.

In *Lenore Divine*, Mrs Doom is another character portrayed as one of Devanny's 'Weaker Women', inhibited by her entrenched social values and her natural traits that do not allow her to develop beyond these values.<sup>62</sup> Described as 'the too obviously jazz type', it is unsurprising that Devanny uses a character she strongly disapproves of to express racist sentiment.<sup>63</sup> After meeting Kowhatu, depicted as an honourable and courteous man, Mrs Doom responds to Alle Wishart's reference to Kowhatu as a 'gentleman' by exclaiming: 'Gentleman! Gentlemen, eh? Why, he's only a common Maori.'<sup>64</sup> Alle's retort is quick and sharp: '[i]t is you who are common to talk in that way. He's a wonderful man, and honours us by coming among us, and you know it' highlights the idiocy of such a statement.<sup>65</sup> By asserting respect for Māori as a 'good' characteristic in Alle, and in contrast racist view with Mrs Doom, a character that Devanny would place at the bottom of her social hierarchy, such racial comments are highlighted as fundamentally incorrect.

One of the clearest critiques of racism occurs in *The Butcher Shop*. In her biography of Devanny, Ferrier argues that Margaret's reaction to the affair between the characters Miette Longstair and Jimmy Tutaki is a prime example of the dominant views of race within New Zealand society.<sup>66</sup> The scene is saturated

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<sup>62</sup> For more information on the significant of 'natural traits' to Devanny's characters refer to Chapter One, pp. 41 - 45 of this thesis.

<sup>63</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 80.

<sup>64</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 87.

<sup>65</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 87.

<sup>66</sup> Ferrier, *Romantic Revolutionary*, p. 36.

with racial tension. After Miette reveals her relationship with Jimmy to Margaret Devanny infers: ‘the woman’s woman in [Margaret] flamed to white-hot at the Maori’s insult to her sex [...] Tutaki had rubbed the woman’s face in the dirt; he had used her – a white woman – and then wished to throw her aside.’<sup>67</sup> At this point in the plot, Margaret is still unaware that the relationship is sexual. After discovering this, Margaret’s anger rises and she becomes a transformed woman, attacking Jimmy:

Her hands were clenched and shaking in his face; her eyes blazed forth such a fire of wrath and hatred upon him that he recoiled and paled before her. It was her racial pride, the woman’s woman in her. [...] “You – you nigger!” she cried.<sup>68</sup>

Devanny describes these events as Margaret’s ‘radical pride’ playing ‘havoc with her common sense’ that, for Ferrier, demonstrates an attempt on Margaret’s part to remain logical, but which was overpowered by the pressures of her social context.<sup>69</sup> Devanny then highlights Margaret’s reaction as unjust, something Margaret is aware of herself. After her outburst, Margaret quickly becomes stricken with remorse, exclaiming:

Oh, Jimmy, my friend, you know I did not mean that! You know I couldn’t mean that Jimmy! It was what you said, what you called a woman of my race. She is only what you are, Jimmy. You were partner to her sin. [...] I apologise to you, Jimmy. [...] I apologise.<sup>70</sup>

While the apology does not expunge the original comments, it demonstrates that Margaret is ashamed of her initial reactionary racial slur. Thus, by depicting racial awareness in this way, Devanny was consciously seeking to deconstruct

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<sup>67</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 167.

<sup>68</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 169.

<sup>69</sup> Ferrier, *Romantic Revolutionary*, p. 36.

<sup>70</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 170.

similar attitudes, she considered, present within society. In critiquing these attitudes, Devanny emphasises and challenges the prominence of racial tensions in 1920s New Zealand. Greater attention may have been paid to Māori health and education, and nationalists concerned with New Zealand's international reputation may have promulgated the myth of racial harmony, but Devanny's novels confront the notion that racism was alive and kicking in 1920s New Zealand.

Because Devanny's novels were considered by her contemporaries as 'lurid' in their uncompromising depiction of uncomfortable issues, these works have been side-lined by the majority of New Zealand literary scholars and historians.<sup>71</sup> Yet, they reveal a number of significant complexities surrounding race relations in the 1920s and early 1930s. Devanny's fiction confronts racism directly. She is critical of, and condescending towards, racist attitudes, while paradoxically embracing traditional racial assumptions. Devanny draws on contemporary ideas relating to the theory that Māori were amenable to assimilation and discourses linked to social Darwinism.<sup>72</sup> Through the tensions between Devanny's critique of racism and the underlying racial assumptions in her novels, complex Pākehā attitudes towards Māori are revealed. These ambiguities are what make Devanny's novels so valuable to historians. They reflect multiple stereotypes and a number of contradictory aspects of New Zealand race relations through a contemporary social commentary, and, pre-dating later twentieth century politics and theoretical paradigms that tend to have a significant impact on historical scholarship.

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<sup>71</sup> E. H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs New Zealand, 1940), p. 148.

<sup>72</sup> Moffat makes note of the influence of social Darwinism on Devanny's fiction in her introduction to *Lenore Divine*. Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', p. xxxv.

Devanny's radical and positive construction of Māori characters was strongly influenced by the work of George Winter, the Secretary-General of the newly formed Communist Party of New Zealand and an anthropologist with a keen interest in Māori culture.<sup>73</sup> Encouraged by Winter, Devanny wrote an unpublished manuscript entitled 'The Sexlife of the Maoris' which commented approvingly on the communal equality of pre-European Māori society, which she regarded as embodying many of Engels' ideals.<sup>74</sup> Winter's influence is particularly apparent in *The Butcher Shop*, in which one of the characters exclaims: 'They [Maori] are a wonderful race. Why, Elsdon Best and Edward Tregear and Johannes Anderson cannot do too much honour to the Maoris.'<sup>75</sup>

Devanny's positive depiction of Lenore and Kowhatu's relationship in *Lenore Divine* is also shaped by her interest in contemporary debates about eugenics. Devanny's belief that heredity played a significant part in physical, mental and moral health can be troubling for twenty-first century readers, but her descriptions of Māori as a 'strong' race bear the imprint of this line of thought. Kowhatu Ngatoro, invokes arguments about genetic traits when he attempts to persuade Lenore to leave her alcoholic husband, Holly, and marry him:

The strong only has the right to survive. Holly is weak; through no fault of his own, I grant you, but weak just the same. His breed must be weak like himself. I will breed a strong race, Lenore – you and I together.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', p. xxxviii.

<sup>74</sup> Jean Devanny, 'The Sexlife of the Maoris', James Cook University Library, JD/MSS/67, quoted by Ferrier, *Romantic Revolutionary*, pp. 49-51.

<sup>75</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 46; Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', p. xxxviii.

<sup>76</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, pp. 114 – 115.

Devanny not only viewed Māori as a powerful race, but believed that inter-racial relationships Māori and Pākehā were ‘genetically strengthening.’<sup>77</sup> In this regard, her attitude was remarkable for the period in which she was writing. She appropriated rhetoric surrounding eugenics to argue for the value and integrity of Māori-Pākehā relationships rather than linking genetics to social Darwinist fears of miscegenation.

In spite of her desire to critique racism in her fiction, underlying assumptions related to ideas surrounding the superiority of European culture so infiltrate Devanny’s work. For example, a paternalistic view of Māori is evident in the language that Devanny uses to describe her Māori characters, even where she is attempting to be complimentary. Devanny consciously strives to directly challenge contemporary racist attitudes, yet her critiques often convey innate a racial undertones. This can be seen in *Lenore Divine* where Kowhatu is continuously linked to a ‘pungent’ body odour which Devanny specifically relates to his race.<sup>78</sup> Ngaire is described as having perfect white teeth, ideal for chewing mutton bones.<sup>79</sup> Within *Bushman Burke* and *The Butcher Shop* Māori are referred to as a ‘backwards race’, ‘barbarians’, and ‘savages.’<sup>80</sup>

Devanny’s descriptions of her particular understanding of Māori history and a number of Māori customs also are an example of where her fiction is imbued with the racist undertones of the historical moment she inhabited. In *Lenore Divine*, while the protagonist praises pre-European Māori culture given its similarities to communism, Lenore still attempts to convince Ngaire that aspects of Pākehā culture have nevertheless had positive effects on Māori:

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<sup>77</sup> Moffat, ‘Introduction to *Lenore Divine*’, p. xxxvii.

<sup>78</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 201; Moffat, ‘Introduction to *Lenore Divine*’, p. xxxv.

<sup>79</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 39.

<sup>80</sup> Devanny, *Bushman Burke*, p. 81; Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 85; Moffat, ‘Introduction to *Lenore Divine*’, p. xxxv.

Lenore shuddered, “Surely you wouldn’t like to live under those dreadful conditions? Just think, Ngaire. Some of the tribal customs were atrocious. Think of the superstitions – and the cannibalism, Ngaire. Think of the food – fern-roots, fish – often times rotten – kumara, and always bloodshed and strife. Ugh!”<sup>81</sup>

Lenore’s arguments are based on what Kirstine Moffat terms ‘colonial clichés.’<sup>82</sup>

It is fascinating that Devanny draws on these ‘clichés’, while, at the same time, challenging other traditional Pākehā attitudes towards Māori. This ambiguity in Devanny’s writing offers insights into the multi-layered attitudes towards race relations in the early twentieth century.

Significantly, Devanny’s central Māori characters are also depicted as superior to other minor Māori characters based on the acceptance of European culture and education. These characters are most likely drawn from influential Māori politicians of the period, such as Sir Peter Buck and Sir Apirana Ngata, who were educated and excelled in Pākehā society. While Devanny praises a number of pre-European customs, her central Māori characters all have an appreciation of Pākehā culture and are educated, which separates them from other Māori in the context of the novels. In *Lenore Divine*, Lenore is discussing with Lafe Osgood how Pākehā rather Māori have breached the Treaty of Waitangi. She states:

The common Maori’s simplicity does not hold much rancour, but it stands to reason that an intelligent, educated girl like Ngaire, who has studied the history of her race and white aggression, will feel bitterness.<sup>83</sup>

Here Devanny is at once radical in terms of her condemnation of ‘white aggression’, yet at the same time suggests that those Māori who have not been

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<sup>81</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 42.

<sup>82</sup> Moffat, ‘Introduction to *Lenore Divine*’, p. xxxv.

<sup>83</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 52.



educated are unable to understand how they have been repressed. Devanny's understanding of Māori culture is still formed from underlying assumptions regarding the superiority of European culture (although not capitalism).

This assimilationist discourse is revisited regularly in the twentieth century. These sentiments endured well into the 1960s, reflected in the Hunn Report 1960 which continued to insist that 'cause of race relations would [...] be best served by absorbing as many Maori children as possible' into public schools.<sup>84</sup> In *Paradise Reforged* James Belich emphasises the dominance of this assimilationist discourse. He notes that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Pākehā believed that Māori 'were rapidly dying out culturally: becoming Brown Britons through intermarriage, individualisation, modernisation and assimilation.'<sup>85</sup> Ranginui Walker similarly comments on the role of the education system in 'civilizing' Māori. He writes that the Pākehā education system was 'an arena of cultural conflict' where Māori identity was repressed and assimilation was emphasised.<sup>86</sup> The education of Māori characters in *Bushman Burke*, *Lenore Divine*, and *The Butcher Shop* is likewise considered a 'civilizing' mission, and an essential step to greater heights in Devanny's imagined social hierarchy. For Devanny, and many of her contemporaries, conforming to the European way of life was the correct development pathway for Māori.<sup>87</sup> Thus, while Devanny's fiction is condemning of racial discrimination, it ironically draws on underlying racial assimilationist discourses to commend the efforts of those Maori who have embraced the obvious benefits of a superior cultural world.<sup>88</sup> It should be noted,

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<sup>84</sup> Hunn, p. 25.

<sup>85</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 189.

<sup>86</sup> Ranginui Walker, p. 147.

<sup>87</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 189.

<sup>88</sup> Devanny also draws on assumptions about the doom of the Māori race in *The Butcher Shop* through the character Jimmy. Jimmy sits on the Wellington wharf and 'his heart turned to water,

however, that Devanny's perception of Pākehā education as a key liberating influence for Māori bears a remarkable similarity to her advocacy for enlightenment through education for her female protagonists. Thus, her comments on education must be understood within the broader frame of her socialist ideology rather than as simply a clichéd form of cultural colonisation.

While Devanny is, at times, critical of aspects of Māori society, her fiction is remarkable for its deconstruction of dominant cultural clichés of the time. When the protagonist of Devanny's novel *Bushman Burke*, considers why she is obsessed with a part Māori character, she wonders whether 'his fascination lies in the mere hint of barbarian blood he carried'. However, this view that it is his exotic ethnicity that attracts her is immediately undercut by her answer: 'not, in view of her experience'. Devanny writes Flo 'recalled numbers of other men, pure whites, like him', thus Devanny subtly punctured dominant discourses of racial othering and difference.<sup>89</sup> Here Devanny directly exposes racial issues present in her contemporary world, questioning with some rigour the validity of these negative social assumptions about Māori. Nevertheless, her critiques are drawn from ingrained Pākehā theories of European cultural superiority. In this way, Devanny's novels both directly challenge contemporary racial discourses and are reflective of them. The tensions between the criticism of Pākehā bigotry and the power of entrenched assumptions surrounding cultural assimilation present in Devanny's novels make these works fascinating as well as useful for the historian. They provide insight into the complex nature of attitudes regarding race and culture in early twentieth century New Zealand.

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and his eyes spilled over their tears with anguish for the death of his race, for the death of his race which was slowly sinking, sinking, with thinned blood and loosened muscle and sagging belly back into the earth which was the dust from which it had sprung'. Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 143.

<sup>89</sup> Devanny, *Bushman Burke*, p. 56.

## Chapter Four:

### The Hammer and the Pick: Reflections on Class

She saw the froth of the social order, the idle, the frivolous; saw all gaudy be-feathered uselessness knocked from its perch; saw industry exact its own from society.

Jean Devanny, *Dawn Beloved*<sup>1</sup>

As discussed in the previous two chapters, the novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee offer nuanced readings relevant to 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. These novels not only provide a social commentary on ideas and debates surrounding gender and race, but give considered discussions on class. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, classlessness was a powerful assumption in the New Zealand public consciousness.<sup>2</sup> This myth has been deconstructed by various historians publishing from the late 1970s onwards.<sup>3</sup> The novels of Devanny and Lee deal with issues of class and class distinctions well before the emergence of these critical histories. Their fiction reveals that various myths of equality were being severely tested and addressed in the 1920s and 1930s, and were not necessarily discussions and debates awaiting the attention of historians. The novels show that the broad narrative of movement towards a ‘modern’, egalitarian, New Zealand was in actuality a far more troubled phenomenon in the lives of those who lived through the period.

Both authors address issues of class through a socialist framework, pointing to harsh conditions faced by members of the working class. The depiction of

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Devanny, *Dawn Beloved* (London: Duckworth, 1928), p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> The allure of a colony in which class was not a restrictive issue influenced not only those who sought to immigrate to New Zealand, but was a prominent discourse employed by those who worked to create initial histories of New Zealand. See for instance see William Pember Reeves’ poem *New Zealand* quoted on page 7 of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Erik Olssen, Clyde Griffen and Frank Jones, *An Accidental Utopia? Social Mobility and the Foundations of an Egalitarian Society, 1880 - 1940* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2011); James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland: The Penguin Press, 2001); Philippa Mein Smith, *A Concise History of New Zealand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

poverty, particularly in Lee's *Children of the Poor*, presents an interesting reading of class relevant to the narrative of social progression generally linked to early twentieth century New Zealand. As noted by a contemporary of Lee, Jane Mander, the poverty depicted in *Children of the Poor* was 'a smack in the face to God's Own Country.'<sup>4</sup> Devanny also addressed issues of class within her fiction. Similarly to Lee, Devanny's critique of class is taken from her own observations of the entrenched realities of class distinctions in the 1920s and early 1930s. Contemporary understandings of class and class cultures are highlighted through the social critiques in the novels. A closer consideration of the ways in which class is dealt with by both authors allows for a further textured picture of class in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand to emerge.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century New Zealand there existed a myth of class equality. The portrayal of a less stratified social structure in New Zealand was developed through promotional literature - propaganda - to draw prospective immigrants to the colony in the early to mid-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Miles Fairburn argues that this promotional literature drew on a 'utopian' image that presented New Zealand as an Arcadian paradise in which the natural abundance of the country allowed prosperity and independence for the working classes as well as freedom from 'status anxiety' for the middle classes.<sup>6</sup> New Zealand was also frequently described as a 'better Britain', a place in which free men could establish and forge a new and improved 'paradise'.<sup>7</sup> This idea - that

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Jones, *Picking Up the Traces: The Making of a New Zealand Literary Culture 1932 – 1945* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003), p. 258.

<sup>5</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, 'Utopianism and the Creation of New Zealand National Identity', *Utopian Studies*, 12 (2001), 1– 18 (p. 6).

<sup>6</sup> Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and Its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society, 1850 - 1900* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989), pp. 27, 42.

<sup>7</sup> For further information on the concept of a 'better Britain' see; Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 27 – 118. It was believed by some settlers in the nineteenth century, particularly Edward Gibbon

New Zealand could be a better Britain - came to be used frequently within 'booster' literature and fed into the myth that New Zealand was a 'social laboratory' during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

In 1898 William Pember Reeves published the first major history of New Zealand, *The Long White Cloud: Aotearoa*.<sup>9</sup> Reeves portrayed the years of 1890 to 1898 as a period of radical political experimentation in New Zealand, concluding that both the Progressives and the Conservatives came to embrace this egalitarian attitude.<sup>10</sup> For Pember Reeves, these two parties shared 'one main principle':

that a young democratic country, still almost free from extremes of wealth and poverty, from class hatreds and fears and the barriers these create, supplies an unequalled field for the safe and rational experiment in the hope of preventing and shutting out some of the worst social evils and miseries which afflict great nations alike in the old world and the new.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this optimism, Pember Reeves conceded that it 'would be absurd to pretend that social distinctions' were unknown, but argued that these were far less pronounced than in England and other colonies because of radical political experimentation and more flexible social mobility.<sup>12</sup> According to Keith Sinclair, *The Long White Cloud* remained one of the more popular national histories up

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Wakefield, that New Zealand could be formed into a better version of Britain. Tom Brooking, *The History of New Zealand* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), pp. 43–45.

<sup>8</sup> The term 'booster literature' is taken from James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 153–154. For more on New Zealand as the 'social laboratory of the world' see Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 271.

<sup>9</sup> William Pember Reeves, *The Long White Cloud: Ao Tea Roa* (London: Horace Marshall and Son, 1898).

<sup>10</sup> Pember Reeves, p. 396.

<sup>11</sup> Pember Reeves, p. 397.

<sup>12</sup> Pember Reeves, p. 412.

until to the 1950s.<sup>13</sup> Thus, through the 1920s and 1930s, the myth of New Zealand's apparent classlessness continued largely unchecked.

Despite a prevailing national discourse of class equality, the myth did not go entirely unchallenged by those living in early twentieth century New Zealand. The election campaign for the Labour Party prior to the 1935 election, for instance, stressed the issues caused by significant class differences in New Zealand. One poster, in particular, played on a number of contemporary myths, depicting a group of unemployed men performing a job usually given to horses, while above the central image a sketch of Richard Seddon reads; 'This! – in God's own country!'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Keith Sinclair, 'Reeves, William Pember - Biography', *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, 2010 <<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2r11/1>> [accessed 5 January 2013].

<sup>14</sup> '[New Zealand Labour Party]: "This! - in God's Own Country!" Relief Workers Cheaper Than Horses! [1931]', *National Library of New Zealand* <[http://mp.natlib.govt.nz/detail/?id=3403&t=items&q=&f=genreid\\$156341&u=0&s=a&l=en&tc=0&recordNum=0&numResults=20&p=0](http://mp.natlib.govt.nz/detail/?id=3403&t=items&q=&f=genreid$156341&u=0&s=a&l=en&tc=0&recordNum=0&numResults=20&p=0)> [accessed 5 January 2013].



## Relief Workers Cheaper THAN HORSES!

*"So far as men engaged on Roadwork are concerned, the ideal" must be to move them 'over the fence' on to the land."*

THUS spoke the Rt. Hon. J. G. Coates, who with the Rt. Hon. G. Forkes is joint leader of the Government in Parliament. The above photograph is of relief workers working under his department, and shows what he means.

## Women of New Zealand! WILL YOU STAND FOR THIS?

This Government professes to save your country, but reduces your sons, your husbands, your brothers to the cheapness of horses. It is in YOUR power to effect a change in Government by voting LABOUR and let New Zealand be once again "God's own Country."

Garvitch, Jeremy Veniamin, 1890-1990. [New Zealand Labour Party] : "This! - in God's own country!" Relief workers cheaper than horses! [1931]. New Zealand Labour Party : [Ephemera, including election pamphlets and propaganda. 1930-1939]. Ref: Eph-B-NZ-LABOUR-1931-01. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22725917>

This was used by the Labour Party to suggest that the Depression had transformed New Zealand from the land of milk and honey to a place riddled with class tensions.<sup>15</sup> But, as Lydia Bloy notes, after Labour obtained victory in the 1935 elections, class inequality was played down as a national issue.<sup>16</sup>

In his edited collection, *Social Class in New Zealand*, David Pitt writes that ‘until recently [the 1970s] the official and intellectual ideology was that New Zealand is, was, and should be, an egalitarian society, and certainly that there is little poverty.’<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the idea of social mobility and relatively equal classes remained a core part of the dominant narrative surrounding New Zealand’s history up until the 1970s.<sup>18</sup>

Keith Sinclair, in his 1959 *A History of New Zealand*, suggests that for the most part New Zealanders had a ‘distaste for privilege’ which made them distinct from Australians and Americans.<sup>19</sup> Sinclair argues that this attitude caused ‘the search for equality’ to become ‘one of the most conspicuous features of New Zealand life.’<sup>20</sup> Similarly to Reeves, Sinclair acknowledges that class did exist in New Zealand, but he contends that it ‘must be more nearly classless [...] than any other society in the world.’<sup>21</sup> In a 1968 essay on New Zealand, M. H. Holcroft claims that ‘[t]he social system in New Zealand is based firmly on the idea of equality.’<sup>22</sup> Keith Jackson and John Harre note that in the late 1960s ‘equality’

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<sup>15</sup> King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, p. 346.

<sup>16</sup> Lydia Bloy, ‘“Class” in the Eye of the Beholder in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand Society’, in *Class, Gender and the Vote: Historical Perspectives from New Zealand*, ed. by Miles Fairburn and Erik Olssen (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2005), pp. 175 – 191 (p. 178).

<sup>17</sup> David Pitt, ‘Are There Social Classes in New Zealand?’, in *Social Class in New Zealand*, ed. by David Pitt (Auckland: Longman Paul Limited, 1977), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Sargent, ‘Utopianism and the Creation of New Zealand National Identity’, pp. 3 – 6.

<sup>19</sup> Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand, Revised Edition* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 275 – 276.

<sup>20</sup> Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand, Revised Edition*, pp. 275 – 276.

<sup>21</sup> Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand, Revised Edition*, p. 276.

<sup>22</sup> M. H. Holcroft, *New Zealand, Revised* (Auckland: A. W. & A. H. Reed, 1968), p. 93.



was ‘the cardinal principle of New Zealand life.’<sup>23</sup> They quote Robert Chapman’s argument that New Zealand did not develop ‘European-style classes but possesses instead a loosely graded society, an equal society.’<sup>24</sup>

The deconstruction of former egalitarian myths relevant to the early twentieth century has been well documented in historical scholarship. David Pitt’s edited collection, for instance, dealt with class equality as it appeared throughout New Zealand history.<sup>25</sup> In the book, Erik Olssen argues that a form of class structure was present in the nineteenth century, but he points out that social mobility was more fluid in the colony than it was in Britain.<sup>26</sup> James Belich notes to the existence of ‘upper middle’, ‘middle’, and ‘lower middle’ classes in early twentieth century society in *Paradise Reforged*.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Philippa Mein Smith also addresses class in *A Concise History of New Zealand*, noting that ‘the depression was a class experience, which left a gulf between the unemployed and the employed, between workers – especially casual labour – and the privileged.’<sup>28</sup> The recently published *An Accidental Utopia: Social Mobility and the Foundations of an Egalitarian Society, 1880 – 1940* demonstrates that class distinctions were present, at least in Dunedin’s Southern suburbs, through an investigation of social mobility.<sup>29</sup> Thus, a rejection of the myth of class equality in the early twentieth century society has become a regular theme dominant in New Zealand historical scholarship.

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<sup>23</sup> Keith Jackson and John Harre, *New Zealand* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> Jackson and Harre, p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> *Social Class in New Zealand*, ed. by David Pitt (Auckland: Longman Paul Limited, 1977).

<sup>26</sup> Erik Olssen, ‘Social Class in Nineteenth Century New Zealand’, in *Social Class in New Zealand*, ed. by David Pitt (Auckland: Longman Paul Limited, 1977), pp. 22 – 41.

<sup>27</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000*, pp. 126 – 127.

<sup>28</sup> Mein Smith, p. 152.

<sup>29</sup> Olssen, Griffen and Jones.

As Linda Bloy writes ‘it seems remarkable that so many contemporaries [those living in early twentieth century New Zealand] still criticised the inequality in the distribution of wealth and power’ given the dominance of discourses linked to social equality. This inequality can be seen in the differing class backgrounds of the characters in Jean Devanny’s novels and the depictions of extreme poverty in Lee’s *Children of the Poor*. These novels reflect a society well aware of class distinctions despite the myth of class equality found within ‘booster’ literature. The fiction of Devanny and Lee deconstruct contemporary discourses surrounding egalitarianism in New Zealand well before the critical examinations of historians in the latter half of the twentieth century.

As discussed earlier, Devanny’s use of class was far more often applied to the role of women in society than to the traditional understanding of class.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, her socialist critique of New Zealand society also addresses contemporary issues surrounding ‘economic’ class. In particular, four of Devanny’s novels, *The Butcher Shop*, *Dawn Beloved*, *Lenore Divine*, and *Poor Swine*, deal with the problems related to class distinctions. Working class communities are depicted within *Poor Swine* and *Dawn Beloved*, and discussed in *The Butcher Shop* and *Lenore Divine*. *The Butcher Shop* is centred on a family of middle class station owners, although these characters continuously interact with characters from working class backgrounds in their employment. The central family in the novel is depicted as wealthy and thus as having a greater social standing than the majority of the other minor characters. *Lenore Divine* differs from *The Butcher Shop* in setting; the majority of the novel is based in urban Wellington among a set of middle-class friends. *Bushman Burke* is also partially

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<sup>30</sup> In this thesis a traditional understanding of class refers to as a group of people who share similar socioeconomic status based on education, wealth, leisure, and skill.

set amongst the upper-middle class families of Wellington. Class distinctions are noticeable in Devanny's fiction through the way that characters interact with those from different socioeconomic circumstances. The doctor's sister in *Poor Swine*, for instance, only mixes with a few women from the mining community because of her higher social standing.<sup>31</sup>

Devanny's critique of class distinctions and the social structure of 1920s New Zealand were informed by her political beliefs. Thus, throughout her novels, Devanny highlights class differences to reinforce the socialist purpose that inspired her fiction. For example, in *Dawn Beloved*, a character from the mining community debates socialism with the protagonist, Dawn:

“One must be for labour or against it. One must either be exploited or exploit, that is, live upon the labour of others. [...] While you remain a member of our class you will be exploited [...]. If you wish to rise above our class, to live in ease or a certain amount of luxury, while the present system endures you must, in order to do so, live parasitically upon the labour of others.”<sup>32</sup>

This character, Duke, then goes on to recount how he transitioned from the ‘milk and water socialism [...] propagated by job hunters and opportunists’ to support scientific socialism under the influence of two American travellers.<sup>33</sup> The discussion about the ‘milk and water’ brand of socialism reinforces Devanny's belief that the working class had been exploited by left wing politicians. This sentiment is also evident in a discussion of the Arbitration Court in *The Butcher Shop*.<sup>34</sup> These depictions support the argument made by Devanny in a letter to the editor of the *Evening Post* in 1925.<sup>35</sup> Here she asserted that ‘a certain section of

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<sup>31</sup> Jean Devanny, *Poor Swine* (London: Duckworth, 1932), p. 69.

<sup>32</sup> Devanny, *Dawn Beloved*, p. 223.

<sup>33</sup> Devanny, *Dawn Beloved*, p. 237.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, ed. by Heather Roberts (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1981), pp. 65 – 67.

<sup>35</sup> Kirstine Moffat, ‘Introduction to Lenore Divine’, in *Lenore Divine* (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), p. xxix.

the [Labour Party] ... were prepared to renounce working-class principles, ideals, and actions in order to capture Liberal votes.<sup>36</sup>

Devanny's discussion of class in *Lenore Divine* is also clearly reflective of her political beliefs. Despite the fact that the novel's cast is made up of a group of middle-class friends, *Lenore Divine* calls for political change through the debates that occur between the central characters. Class distinctions are critiqued through the arguments made by the fictional Labour politician, Lafe Osgood. Through Lafe's discussion with his 'bourgeois' wife, Devanny infers that unemployment was a social problem for which the upper classes were equally responsible:

There is no unit in the country more responsible than you are for their unemployment, and for all the other ills that beset society. You are a part of the whole. The country's population is an aggregation of units like yourself. The economy of the country is determined by the voice of the people, and your voice helps to swell the chorus.<sup>37</sup>

While, *Lenore Divine* reflects social realities, in a number of ways it is a utopian fantasy based on the direction that Devanny wished New Zealand politics would take; the novel ending with the election of a socialist government a decade before Labour actually came to power in 1935.<sup>38</sup> Her writing offers fascinating social critiques relevant to class distinctions.

Likewise, John A. Lee's *Children of the Poor* refers to issues surrounding class structure in early twentieth century New Zealand. *Children of the Poor* is an influential novel for the period it was published.<sup>39</sup> The direct challenge it

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<sup>36</sup> Jean Devanny, 'Exclusion of Communists', Letter to the Editor, *Evening Post*, 11 May 1925, p. 6, quoted in Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', p. xxix.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, ed. by Kirstine Moffat (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), p. 71.

<sup>38</sup> For more information on how *Lenore Divine* can be read as a utopian fantasy see Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', pp. xxviii – xxxii.

<sup>39</sup> Ken Arvidson, 'Children of the Poor: The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature', *Oxford Reference*, 2012

<<http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/view/10.1093/acref/9780195583489.001.0001/acref-9780195583489-e-240#>> [accessed 6 January 2013]. Arvidson argues that *The*

presented to contemporary debates around social equality found in ‘booster’ literature is essentially what the novel is most well-known for.<sup>40</sup> Although the novel is set in the late nineteenth century it also deals with issues of class relative to Lee’s political ideas and observations in the 1930s.<sup>41</sup> Lee opens with these powerful lines:

This is a story of the gutter. The gutter is not of Paris, of London, of New York, alone. The social gutter is of every clime and race, of village as well as of town, of the New World as well as the Old. There is a broad, deep gutter in British Overseas Dominions.<sup>42</sup>

The novel follows the early life of Albany Porcello, a thief and social outcast, through the poverty ridden streets of Dunedin in the late nineteenth century. Albany’s family are never far from starvation.<sup>43</sup> Issues of class are explored through various accounts about the way in which Albany and his family are treated by other members of society. After moving from his grandfather’s rural house in central South Island to his mother’s home in Dunedin, Albany Porcello reflects on the contrasts he encounters: ‘the first thing I recall is a keen awareness of a quality rather than a visible object or an event. I am aware of poor clothes, of poor food. I see a difference between ours and other families. We are outcasts.’<sup>44</sup> Albany becomes acutely aware of his social position. Donald M. MacRaidl suggests that people in lower socio-economic conditions in the 1920s and 30s were ‘recognised for [their] valuable contribution’ to society and not spurned

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*Children of the Poor* was ‘the first New Zealand novel of social protest’ and this is certainly what the novel is generally known for.

<sup>40</sup> Arvidson argues that *The Children of the Poor* was ‘the first New Zealand novel of social protest’ and this is certainly what the novel is generally known for.

<sup>41</sup> It is generally believed that Lee began to write *Children of the Poor* as a response to the poverty and anguish of the unemployed after he witnessing the 1932 Auckland riots. James Smithies, ‘John A. Lee, 1891 - 1982’, *Kōtare 2008 — Essays in New Zealand Literary Biography*, Early Male Prose Writers, (2008).

<sup>42</sup> John A. Lee, *Children of the Poor*, 1986 ed. (Christchurch: Whitcoulls Publishers, 1934), p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 86.

<sup>44</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 85.

because of social status.<sup>45</sup> Writing later in the century, M. H. Holcroft persisted with this idea that - social class did not affect social standing.<sup>46</sup> Holcroft argues that while '[s]ome men may have more money than others, or hold better positions', those who knew 'where they come from [New Zealand]' were unlikely to 'feel inferior.'<sup>47</sup> *Children of the Poor* presents a very different lived reality. Porcello and his family are continuously derided because of their poverty, even by those slightly above their social standing. For example, the neighbours in the poor quarter of Dunedin are said to judge the family just as much as those in higher social positions:

The rent was paid in part by a semi-state benevolent institution, which sent an occasional woman visitor to make sure we were not living riotously. She made indiscreet inquiries among the neighbours, who were, thus, our censors. But however pitiful the reports, the aid was still forthcoming after mother had been suitably rebuked. It was probably cheaper to starve us in our home than feed and clothe us in a state institution.<sup>48</sup>

Lee's depictions of class struggles are drawn from his observations. Despite claims by scholars such as M. H. Holcroft that in 'real life' social stratification was 'hard to discover', issues of class were key themes and ideas present in Lee's vision of contemporary society. For Lee, class defined the way in which people were treated and how they thought of themselves within society.

After its publication, *Children of the Poor* was praised by many contemporary literary critics and newspaper reviewers for its depiction of the

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<sup>45</sup> Donald M. MacRaild, 'Review: Erik Olssen, Clyde Griffen and Frank Jones, An Accidental Utopia? Social Mobility and the Foundations of an Egalitarian Society, 1880 - 1940', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 46 (2012), p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Holcroft.

<sup>47</sup> Holcroft, pp. 83 – 84.

<sup>48</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 86.

poverty present in parts of New Zealand.<sup>49</sup> In an article for the *Evening Star* in 1939, Alan Mulgan claimed, in reference to *Children of the Poor*, that John A. Lee ‘might be called the Jack London of this country.’<sup>50</sup> Eric McCormick, while critical of the style in which the novel was written, commented on the unique depiction of a social underbelly in New Zealand, suggesting that *Children of the Poor* was the first novel that revealed this ‘experience’.<sup>51</sup> This response indicates that debate around the actuality of social equality was present in the 1930s despite the dominance of the ‘social laboratory’ ideal.

These distinctions of class are also apparent in Lee’s other novel, *The Hunted*. A friend of Albany Porcello’s, Milly, is scorned by the community because of her class.<sup>52</sup> Lee writes that middle-class characters judged Milly ‘by her tousled head, her torn stockings and drunken father.’<sup>53</sup> Milly is an innocent figure in the novel, but is considered to be promiscuous and a negative influence on the other children in the community solely based on her attire and the social position of her father.

The novels of Devanny and Lee suggest that people living in 1920s and 1930s society were well aware of class inequalities. These novels offer vivid descriptions that not only engage with social inequalities of the day, but consider the way in which those social stations were recognisable and pronounced. Thus, the fiction of these two authors is of value to historians because it provides a contemporary social commentary that aimed to directly challenge the myth of equality.

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<sup>49</sup> Erik Olssen, *John A. Lee* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1977), pp. 67 – 71.

<sup>50</sup> Alan Mulgan, ‘A Century of Literature’, *EP*, 7 November 1939, p. 39.

<sup>51</sup> McCormick, p. 173.

<sup>52</sup> Albany Porcello is the protagonist of both *Children of the Poor* and *The Hunted*.

<sup>53</sup> John A. Lee, *The Hunted*, 1975 ed. (Wellington: Price Milburn, 1936), p. 238.

The myth of New Zealand's 'classlessness' has been strongly connected to assumptions about flexible class mobility. Erik Olssen, Clyde Griffen and Frank Jones' study on Southern Dunedin demonstrates that social mobility was more fluid in New Zealand than it was in the American context.<sup>54</sup> However, as MacRaïld notes in his review of *An Accidental Utopia?* 'occupational status was less fluid than we might have expected.'<sup>55</sup> This limited class mobility is an issue dealt with by John A. Lee in *Children of the Poor*. In terms of social mobility it is significant that *Children of the Poor* and *The Hunted* are semi-autobiographical. Influenced by his upbringing in a low socio-economic community, John A. Lee became a prominent Labour politician.<sup>56</sup> Lee, himself, may be an example of upward social mobility, but his novels contend that social stratification was not a fluid journey.

The mother of the protagonist of the novel works hard for the majority of her adult life, but is never able to raise her family out of poverty. Albany's family are depicted as the poorest of the poor.<sup>57</sup> Lee implies that it is not the fault of the family or Albany's mother, but a reflection of a failed social system and the prevalence of entrenched hypercritical values. This is addressed in the statement made by Lee's central character Albany:

Mother's employers were always gracious in regard to unwanted leftovers. It satisfied their magnanimity to know that the fragments that would otherwise decorate the swill tub, gave us joy and sustenance. But mother's employers were not so generous in the wages they allotted her.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> MacRaïld, p. 82.

<sup>55</sup> MacRaïld, p. 82.

<sup>56</sup> For information on Lee's political life see Olssen, *John A. Lee*.

<sup>57</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 85.

<sup>58</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 87.



Here, Lee offers a searching critique of the idea of the deserving poor.<sup>59</sup> He implies that it is difficult for Albany's mother to fulfil social expectations and, thus, receive charitable relief, because she was too poor to conform to these expectations in the first place.

This critique of the hypercritical nature of society is reinforced in the novel when Albany's mother becomes pregnant. She attempts to find employment, but, as Lee writes 'mentally willing and physically able to continue work, my mother [Albany's] had reached that state not infrequently termed "disgraceful."' <sup>60</sup> Lee implies that rigid social conventions surrounding social expectations bound people of lower socioeconomic circumstances within subordinate positions. His view grapples with the idea that social boundaries were easily traversed in the early twentieth century. In emphasising the often censorious way in which Lee believed sections of New Zealand dealt with those living in poverty, his fiction engages with contemporary understandings of class. In this way, his novels are highly valuable to historians because they provide a contemporary perspective on a number of class related issues.

Likewise, Devanny's novels are also significantly useful to historians researching class in the early twentieth century. Her novels, much like Lee's, engage with issues of limited social mobility, particularly through employment. On the surface the upward social movement of characters from Devanny's novels, such as Lilian from *Poor Swine*, Dawn from *Dawn Beloved*, and Margaret from *The Butcher Shop*, could be read as a reflection of dominant contemporary discourses that emphasised fluid class mobility. Yet, two of these shifts only

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<sup>59</sup> The 'deserving poor' is a phrase used to describe the way in which some charitable institutions interacted with those in poverty. It reflects the idea that help ought to be only given to those proved to be deserving; those who conform to social expectations.

<sup>60</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 94.

occur after the characters have spent the majority of the novels struggling through desperate economic conditions because of their husbands' limited incomes. The advancement of their economic standing brings the narrative to a positive conclusion and is more of a plot device than evidence of a contemporary belief in fluid social boundaries. The exception to this is Margaret, Devanny's key character in *The Butcher Shop*, who marries 'upwards' at the start of the novel. Margaret comes from a lower middle class family, and received a reasonable education as a child, thus her rise in the social ranks is not as extreme as Lilian and Dawn. What she does share in common with Dawn and Lilian is the notion that her ascendancy is facilitated by a man of higher economic and social standing, in Margaret's case Barry Messenger. Messenger is attracted to her because of an inherent intelligence and temperament that makes her superior in terms of refinement and cultural understanding. Likewise, Lilian and Dawn rise above their station through marriage. They, too, are depicted as possessing inherent personal qualities and a desire for further education that Devanny believed ought to place them on the upper levels of her imagined social hierarchy. Lilian's transition through the social ranks occurs when she absconds with Julian Greville, an eccentric and socially detached 'gentleman'. Likewise, Dawn moves beyond her working class origins by marrying her life-long friend Gavin Fuller after the death of her first husband. In writing about the struggles Lilian and Dawn endure during their first marriages, Devanny makes the point that even if the couples worked hard and managed to save, they would not have been able to elevate their social standing in an economic sense.

The depictions of social mobility in Devanny's fiction are significant, particularly given her strong socialist beliefs. Social advancement does not occur

through employment or occupational mobility; therefore, Devanny's writings do not reflect the dominant contemporary myth of fluid social boundaries. In fact, in many ways, the upward movement of her female protagonists reflects Devanny's desire for a new social hierarchy. For Devanny, the capitalist system in New Zealand needed to be replaced with a new social structure in which power was given to those with intelligence, a superior grasp of education and an inherent taste for culture, particularly music and literature.<sup>61</sup> Through this critique of New Zealand's social flaws, Devanny's reveals how various groups engaged with debates surrounding class and class equality in the 1920s. These varied assessments offer a nuanced perspective of class issues in this era from inside the period itself.

The way in which Devanny sets up her critique of the capitalist class structure that she believed existed in New Zealand society provides one of the more fascinating contradictions in her New Zealand novels. She argues for greater equality for the working classes in the majority of her novels, but often these ideals are expressed by cultured, middle class, characters. It is also significant that, while aiming to forward her socialist beliefs, Devanny's descriptions of the working classes do not always depict these classes in a positively. In *Dawn Beloved*, the central character, Dawn Devoy, looks down at her new born son and imagines the future: 'Should her child – hers and Val's – find as its heritage the bare pick and shovel? Those implements of toil which, while making the world go round, yet yield to their user a bare subsistence.'<sup>62</sup> For Dawn, removing her son from becoming 'a hand behind a drill – and nothing

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<sup>61</sup> Devanny's discussion of inherent traits that made her central characters appreciate culture and have a desire for education are most likely influenced by her belief in theories linked to eugenics.

<sup>62</sup> Devanny, *Dawn Beloved*, p. 224.

more' is incredibly important.<sup>63</sup> This is at odds with the way Devanny protests against Labour politicians and union leaders who lose their radical socialist values after they gain office earlier in *Dawn Beloved*.<sup>64</sup> These contradictory aspects enable complex readings of class in 1920s New Zealand.

In her chapter "Class' in the Eye of the Beholder in 1930s and 1940s New Zealand Society', Lydia Bloy points to the significance of A. P. M. Coxon and C. L. Jones' observation that although 'we know a great deal about the differences which social class makes in many areas, we know relatively little about how people actually perceived their social world and how social class fits into these perceptions.'<sup>65</sup> In critiquing the capitalist system, Devanny and Lee note various ways in which social standing was addressed in society, particularly the hypercritical nature of entrenched assumptions about the working classes. Devanny and Lee's novels offer multiple readings of 'class' inequalities in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. Their writing asserts that an acute awareness of social distinctions in their contemporary context. Lee's *Children of the Poor* and *The Hunted* deal with the view that poverty was considered to be both the fault of the individual and the social system. For the puritanical and censorious characters of these novels, poverty is the fault of the individual. Likewise, Devanny points to the social problems created by contemporary understandings of class, although her critique is further complicated by the contradictory aspects surrounding class, gender, and social mobility in her fiction. Yet, this only adds greater depth to what her fiction reveals about contemporary perspective of class. Indeed, Devanny and Lee's novels demonstrate that class issues were not new concepts

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<sup>63</sup> Dawn's respect for the miners is portrayed through her opinions of them after having just moved into the mining community. For an example refer to Devanny, *Dawn Beloved*, p. 142.

<sup>64</sup> Devanny, *Dawn Beloved*, p. 223.

<sup>65</sup> Bloy, p. 176.

placed on the past by late twentieth century historians, but well entrenched problems that both novelists engaged with, and commented on, in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, Devanny and Lee's fiction is valuable in that it offers various readings on class in New Zealand society.

## Chapter Five:

### Puritanism, Religious Conformity, and Agnostic Wowsers

Fire and brimstone gave me an early bias, and I hated God because I  
feared His unrelenting power to punish.

John A. Lee, *Children of the Poor*.<sup>1</sup>

Many of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee's novels address gender roles and class divisions relative to what they believed were strict moral conventions in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. In this regard, both authors were part of an emerging anti-puritan tradition in early twentieth century literature.<sup>2</sup> However, this anti-puritanism, as with so much of their fiction, reflect contradictory views full of complexities and ambiguities. On the one hand they both attack what they regarded as hypocritical and repressive social values and practices, such as the repression of sexual knowledge, while, at the same time, alert to the evils of alcohol abuse. It is typical to view the 1920s and 1930s period as one in which powerful binaries operated, with orthodox religion closely allied to the prohibition movement, and agnostic questioning of traditional belief regarded as a natural antagonist of the social purity movement. Their fiction unpacks these narrow essentialisations and demonstrates the dangers of attempting to neatly package lived reality, for their writing offers at once critiques secular puritanism, while, simultaneously condemning the 'demon drink.' Such is the complexity of their writing, they might most aptly be described as 'agnostic wowsers': a seeming contradiction in terms that will be explored throughout this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Lee, *Children of the Poor*, 1986 ed. (Christchurch: Whitcoulls Publishers, 1934), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the anti-puritan tradition in late nineteenth and early twentieth century New Zealand literature refer to Kirstine Moffat, 'Destruction, Transformation, Rebellion, Alienation: The Critique of Puritanism in Pre-1930 New Zealand Novels', *JNZL: Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 16 (2000), pp. 86 – 96.

A number of late nineteenth and early twentieth century New Zealand writers have attacked the repressive puritanical respectability associated with lower middle-class values that emphasised continuous hard work, the suppression of sexuality, and an unquestioned faith in organised religion.<sup>3</sup> These writers, such as Louisa Baker, Jane Mander, and Hector Bolitho, viewed puritanism as creatively stifling, and linked it to a rejection of individuality.<sup>4</sup> Puritan values were used as a form of social control within New Zealand communities to keep members within accepted gender roles, class positions, and even personal relationships.<sup>5</sup> Devanny's fiction comments on contemporary social values, particularly in her critique of the role of women within marriage. Devanny's protagonist in *Devil Made Saint*, Jan Saffron, for instance, starts the novel as an embodiment of the 'repressed puritan' and Lilian, the central character of *Poor Swine*, is chained to her unsuccessful marriage because of strict conventions.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Lee is heavily critical of puritanical values, particularly the type associated with charity and the idea of the deserving poor.<sup>7</sup> Both authors are critical of the way in which religion and puritanism intersect to repress the individual. This is apparent in the way their novels depict deficient sexual

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that organised religion was not at fault, rather the way in which people used faith as a form of social control. Peter J. Gibbons, 'The Climate of Opinion', in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Rice, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 312.

<sup>4</sup> Moffat, 'Destruction, Transformation, Rebellion, Alienation', p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of Lee and Devanny's fiction there is a variety of social communities given the range of settings. *Children of the Poor* and *The Hunted*, Lee's novels that are set in New Zealand, focus on urban Dunedin, Burnham Industrial School and the surrounding South Island country side. Devanny's novels are set in urban Wellington, South Island mining communities, a sheep station, and a small tree cutting camp. Between Lee and Devanny, a number of New Zealand communities are discussed, both rural and urban. Arguably this makes them representative of mainstream social issues over a range of Pākehā communities. John A. Lee, *The Hunted*, 1975 ed. (Wellington: Price Milburn, 1936).

<sup>6</sup> Moffat, 'Destruction, Transformation, Rebellion, Alienation', p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> The protagonist of Lee's *Children of the Poor*, Albany Porcello, declares that '[c]harity must taste bitter to prevent aspiration'; the poor must know they are being saved by the 'good' and 'generous' in society. Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 89. See page 108 of this thesis for more information on Lee's critique of the deserving poor.

education and confront organised religion. These varied commentaries on religious influence offer useful contemporary ideas for historians interested in religious practices during the early twentieth century.

John Stenhouse has argued that New Zealand historical scholarship tends to neglected religion or has emphasised the more negative religious figure as ‘other’ in comparison to the open-minded New Zealander.<sup>8</sup> Stenhouse suggests that religion has been perceived in this way because historians have paid far greater attention to the rise of a secular society. He contends that histories based on assumptions regarding secularism in New Zealand would be unsettled by a greater emphasis on the religious aspects of society.<sup>9</sup> Stenhouse also addresses the role of secular puritanism in New Zealand, suggesting that in both historical and literary discourses this form of puritanism came to embody a number of negative aspects of late nineteenth and early twentieth society. Tobias Harper builds on Stenhouse’s argument through an examination of the way in which religion was imagined by those living in the 1920s. He argues that religion, mainly Christianity, occupied an extremely important place in society.<sup>10</sup> For Harper, while ‘the Great War caused the public to lose confidence in the churches, they did not lose confidence in Christianity.’<sup>11</sup>

In a closer reading of the fiction produced during the early twentieth century it is clear that religion played a significant role in many peoples’ lives. Religion, for instance, features positively in Isabel Peacocke’s *The Guardian*.<sup>12</sup> Puritanism is also addressed in favourable terms by some New Zealand authors,

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<sup>8</sup> John Stenhouse, ‘God’s Own Silence: Secular Nationalism, Christianity and the Writing of New Zealand History’, *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 38 (2004), pp. 52 – 53.

<sup>9</sup> Stenhouse, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Tobias Harper, “‘Amen, Amen!’ Christianity, Society and Visions of the Future in 1920s New Zealand”, *The New Zealand Journal of History*, 42 (2008), p. 135.

<sup>11</sup> Harper, p. 148.

<sup>12</sup> Harper, p. 133.



particularly in Guy Thornton's 1918 novel *The Wowser: A Tale of the New Zealand Bush*.<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, some authors associated organised religion with negative aspects of the puritan tradition, most notably in the novels of Devanny and Lee. The anti-puritan tradition in New Zealand literature is a complex one. These are often critical of both religious puritanism and secular puritanism, frequently conflating the two.<sup>14</sup> The complexities relative to puritanism and religion are perhaps most evident in Frank Sargeson's description of his mother and father in his autobiography, *Once is Enough: A Memoir*.<sup>15</sup> Sargeson is typically viewed in literary criticism as one of the central figures in the anti-puritan tradition. Lawrence Jones writes that Sargeson viewed both of his parents as 'prototypical puritans.'<sup>16</sup> Sargeson's father is described in the book as strictly religious in his puritanism, yet genuine. In contrast, Sargeson mother is said to have conformed to a strict moral code due simply to social expectations rather than personal belief.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Sargeson respected his father's puritanism, but despised his mother's secular and censorious sentiment, which he also believed to be dominant in New Zealand life. These issues are addressed in the writing of many New Zealand authors from the period.<sup>18</sup>

Devanny and Lee's novels are critical of both secular and religious forms of puritanism, further reflecting the complexities surrounding the anti-puritan tradition in literature as well as wider society. Jan Saffron in *Devil Made Saint*, for instance, is used to attack secular rather than the religious puritanism. At the

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<sup>13</sup> Kirstine Moffat, 'The Puritan Paradox: An Annotated Bibliography of Puritan and Anti-Puritan New Zealand Fiction, 1860-1940 : Part 1: The Puritan Legacy', *Kōtare* 2008, 3, p. 65; Guy Thornton, *The Wowser: A Tale of the New Zealand Bush* (London: Kingsgate, 1918).

<sup>14</sup> Moffat, 'The Puritan Paradox', pp. 28 – 30.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Sargeson, *Once Is Enough: A Memoir* (Wellington: Reed, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Jones, 'Frank Sargeson [Norris Frank Davey], 1903 - 1982', *Kōtare* 2008 — *Essays in New Zealand Literary Biography*, Early Male Prose Writers, (2008).

<sup>17</sup> Jones, 'Frank Sargeson [Norris Frank Davey], 1903 – 1982'.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, 'Frank Sargeson [Norris Frank Davey], 1903 - 1982'.

start of the novel, Jan is depicted as straight laced and dangerously repressed, but this aspect of her character is not connected to any form of religious devotion. Instead, her attitudes are born out of social conventions. While secular puritanism is seen as a key driver in *Devil Made Saint*, it is religious conformity that is directly challenged in Devanny's *Poor Swine*.

Like Devanny, John A. Lee is equally complex in his critique of puritanism. Lee's central characters are depicted as understanding the faith of other characters, but being strongly opposed to the way other characters use religious beliefs to judge and control other people. For example, in *The Hunted*, Foreman Alexander tries to prevent Albany from swimming on Sundays because he believes it is 'sinful.'<sup>19</sup> Albany respond by arguing that 'Catholics swim on Sundays', to which Foreman exclaims 'Idolators! Worshippers of images!'<sup>20</sup> According to Lee, Foreman is the one repressed and restricted by his strict puritanism. In this regard, the novels of Devanny and Lee reflect, to some extent, John Stenhouse's ideas regarding the negative impact of secular puritanism in early twentieth century New Zealand. However, through the complex depiction of the intersection between religion and puritanical conventions, Devanny and Lee's fiction problematizes over simplistic assumptions about religion and secularism in early twentieth century New Zealand.

In the novels of both authors strict religious values are addressed through the criticism of traditional education in regard to sexual expression.<sup>21</sup> In *The Butcher Shop*, for instance, the idea of keeping oneself 'clean' and thus

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<sup>19</sup> Lee, *The Hunted*, p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> Lee, *The Hunted*, p. 233.

<sup>21</sup> Although, it should be noted that both authors did not support promiscuity. For more information on this point in relation to *Lenore Divine* refer to Kirstine Moffat, 'Introduction to Lenore Divine', in *Lenore Divine* (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), p. xli. In Devanny's novels, criticism of puritanical social values is largely found in her discussion of marriage and women's role as 'the wife' as discussed earlier in the thesis.

conforming to ‘moral’ norms of decency is explored in the character Barry Messenger, who is considered to be severely lacking in sexual knowledge.<sup>22</sup> This ultimately makes his wife’s relationship with her lover more intense because, unlike Barry, he understands women’s sexual needs.<sup>23</sup> The problem of the repression of sexual knowledge is addressed more directly in Lee’s novel *The Hunted*. During his stay in Burnham Industrial School, Albany, the young protagonist of the novel, is made to feel immense guilt over any form of sexual expression because of the Manager’s conventional views on the subject: ‘Boys might pray to God with the intellect, but the instincts insisted that this alluring and awful territory be explored even if boys entered the ranks of the damned in the act of exploration.’<sup>24</sup> Thus, Albany, and the other youths, feel a ‘secret self-loathing’, believing their impulses to be unnatural and revolting.<sup>25</sup> Here, Lee was not attacking belief itself, but the way in which repressive religious values had become the norm in society, particularly those values that cause unnecessary guilt. These complex depictions of repressive respectability associated with organised Christianity provide nuanced examples of religious and agnostic issues in the 1920s and 1930s. First, the criticism and depictions of puritanical conventions and religious practices described within Devanny and Lee’s novels offer complex insights that both authors saw in contemporary society. Their fiction examples of

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, ed. by Heather Roberts (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1981), p. 115. For more information of the problems associated with a lack of sexual knowledge, particularly in *Dawn Beloved*, refer to Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1999), pp. 16 – 17.

<sup>23</sup> In *The Butcher Shop*, after her affair with Glengarry has begun, Margaret reflects on her relationship with her husband Barry; ‘[f]or she knew that this love and ecstasy she enjoyed with Glengarry was the same emotion she had wondered as in Barry himself in his union with her. She realised the pity of it from Barry’s point of view. How wonderful for them both if she had responded to her husband instead of to this new man who resembled Barry so in appearance and manner!’ Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 115.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, *The Hunted*, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> Lee, *The Hunted*, pp. 66, 69.

more sophisticated readings of secular and religious puritanism beyond narrow essentialised binaries.

Tobias Harper argues that historians have tended to associate early twentieth century Christians with the caricature of the wowser. This vision of religious figures, he insists, was influenced by the use of such stereotypical types by contemporary newspapers. Harper provides various examples of positive depictions of religious individuals. For example, the positive way in which Auckland ministers Jasper Calder and Colin Sorimgeour were discussed in contemporary newspapers.<sup>26</sup> It is significant, then, that the majority of characters who conform to strict understandings of Christianity and lower middle-class respectability are often depicted negatively within Lee and Devanny's novels. The idea of the unquestioning faith in ingrained socially constructed religious attitudes is highlighted by the character of Dawn's mother in *Dawn Beloved*. She is depicted as 'the typical New Zealand backblock woman', for whom morality is viewed as a concept that one is born with and lived, not an idea to be challenged or debated.<sup>27</sup> Her regular church attendance and her unquestioned belief in the superiority of religious belief ground Dawn's mother's morality in religious devotion, not simply secular puritanism. Her puritanism and strict religious belief isolate from her family, and particularly her daughter.

Likewise, John A. Lee's religious figures are also frequently depicted negatively. As Lawrence Jones notes that Lee, along with a number of other early twentieth century writers, represented 'puritans as hypocrites, moral bullies, [and]

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<sup>26</sup> Harper, p. 140.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Devanny, *Dawn Beloved* (London: Duckworth, 1928), p. 9. Her attitude towards sex, and therefore what lead to Dawn's birth, had a damaging effect on the young Dawn. Dawn's mother became so defensive, so shocked when Dawn's brothers allude to sex that Dawn comes to believe that her birth must have been shameful and indecent.<sup>27</sup> Dawn's mother embodies the puritanical society that denies sexual knowledge and the right to question tradition. Devanny, *Dawn Beloved*, pp. 17 – 18.

blind leaders.’<sup>28</sup> In Lee’s *Children of the Poor*, Albany is abused by a court chaplain. The fictional Mr Axeldeen worked with boys undergoing criminal trials, but exploits his position.<sup>29</sup> In these ways, Lee’s writing condemns individuals who are religious hypercritics.

Many of Lee and Devanny’s other puritanical characters are similarly enlisted in their critique of traditional values. These include Foreman Alexander in *The Hunted* and Jan Saffron from *Devil Made Saint*.<sup>30</sup> Harper argues that these portrayals were a common approach taken to organised religion by those who were critical of the churches inability to deal with the issues of modern society.<sup>31</sup> With over ninety per cent of the population identified with a particular Christian denomination in the 1920s, Harper posits that such representations were not a critique of Christianity itself, but a way of pushing for a ‘new’, ‘modern’, version.<sup>32</sup> Devanny and Lee’s critique of puritanism and religion is far too complex to be read on such simplistic terms. The multi-layered way in which Devanny and Lee address religion, morality and puritanism has value to those interested in the social, political and spiritual attitudes evident in 1920s and 1930s. Their writing provides contemporary commentaries that both authors drew from their own personal experiences and perspectives.

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<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Jones, *Picking Up the Traces: The Making of a New Zealand Literary Culture 1932 – 1945* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003), p. 258.

<sup>29</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, pp. 232 – 235. It appears that Lee based his Mr Axeldeen off Reverend Andrew Axelsen who was charged with the assault of four boys in 1922. There are a large amount of similarities between the fictional character and Mr Axelsen. It is significant that Lee remember the court case of 1922 when writing the *Children of the Poor* in the 1930s. It is unlikely that Lee ever came into contact with Axelsen since the Presbyterian Social Service Association Axelsen was involved with was not active in Dunedin until 1907. Therefore, the case made public in 1922 clearly had an impact on Lee. For more on Axelsen refer to Harper, p. 137; ‘Alleged Indecent Assault’, *Evening Post*, 26 May 1922, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, *The Hunted*, pp. 200, 218; Jones, *Picking Up the Traces*, p. 258; Jean Devanny, *Devil Made Saint* (London: Duckworth, 1930).

<sup>31</sup> Harper, p. 144.

<sup>32</sup> Harper, p. 135.

Both Devanny and Lee's novels are grounded in a powerful agnostic tradition. One of Lee's protagonists, for instance, is explicitly described as a 'godless agnostic who believed God was not as bad as He was painted by the Padre.'<sup>33</sup> Lee and Devanny's central characters are often used to comment on organised religion. In *Civilian into Soldier*, the protagonist of the novel, John Guy, is deployed to the Western Front to fight in World War One. While on leave, he returns to his hut drunk when a prayer group intent on holding a service. Guy tells a member of the congregation that he does not mind the service but '[i]nwardly he was furious', Lee writes, 'for he objected to the easy assumption of a few members of the group that God was a Britisher whose passions were gratified and whose name was glorified when German briskets were spitted.'<sup>34</sup> His anger stems from a belief 'in God the Father and not in God the National Soldier': a clear reflection of Lee's own opinion and arguably an issue he struggled with while fighting in World War One.<sup>35</sup> Guy is disgusted that the parson exalts the killing that took away the soldiers' humanity, yet condemns prostitution and the consumption of alcohol that provides the men with a sense of normality.<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, Lilian in Jean Devanny's *Poor Swine* is also outraged by the assumptions of people who conformed to the type of Christianity that imposes rigid conventions on the individual. Before Lilian sings at her first concert, Sister Mary asks Lilian to use her voice 'for the advancement and glory of God.'<sup>37</sup>

Lilian responds:

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<sup>33</sup> John A. Lee, *Civilian into Soldier*, 1963 ed. (London: May Fair Books Ltd, 1937), p. 129.

<sup>34</sup> Lee, *Civilian into Soldier*, p. 124.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, *Civilian into Soldier*, p. 128.

<sup>36</sup> Lee, *Civilian into Soldier*, pp. 128, 258.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Devanny, *Poor Swine* (London: Duckworth, 1932), p. 203.

Sister, I've fought for and paid for my voice in spite of your God! [...] He gave me a voice and a will and then tied me to a drunkard. He told me to cleave to my husband and then forced me to give myself in obedience to the nature He gave me. What is your God, Sister Mary?<sup>38</sup>

These examples offer explicit criticisms of organised religion, particularly social conventions embedded in strict puritan values.

This is not to say that Devanny and Lee did not believe in an underlying moral code. However, there are clear distinctions between the underlying morals supported by Devanny and Lee, and the strict conventions attached to organised Christianity within their novels. This questioning of narrow religious devotion places Lee and Devanny in the minority of New Zealanders during this period.<sup>39</sup> Devanny and Lee's criticism shows that debates regarding religion were contemporary concerns in discourses present in the 1920s and 1930s. Their writing offers a nuanced concern for Christianity in early twentieth century. They have value given the insight they provide regarding the complexities of religious belief. Through the variety of complex attitudes towards contemporary issues, such as religion, reflected within the novels, Devanny and Lee's fiction shows the danger of using neatly packaged binaries to describe the messy nature of lived realities. This can clearly be seen in the way both authors critique both puritanism and alcohol consumption.

In their novels, Devanny and Lee's support of temperance, if not prohibition, implies that anti-alcohol sentiments were not simply attitudes held by religious fanatics, but were evident in the wider community as well. The figure of the wowser was often depicted in early twentieth century cartoons and newspapers as the straight-laced religious character crusading for a dry New

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<sup>38</sup> Devanny, *Poor Swine*, pp. 203 – 204.

<sup>39</sup> Harper, p. 135.

Zealand.<sup>40</sup> For example, in 1909 a correspondent for the *New Zealand Truth* reported that:

The total abstinence party, who have mistaken what they call their "Temperance principles" for part of their religion, have inaugurated, and are carrying on a violent and untruthful crusade against a large body of moderate people who constitute the vast majority of the community, and who, because they do not think as the fanatics think, are branded as social lepers to be avoided and cast out of a "Christian" community. [...] [I]t is just as offensive to come into contact with a full-blown pledged wowser who thinks everyone not of his mind a moral leper.<sup>41</sup>

While temperance rather than abstinence may have been viewed as a more immediate Christian ideal, prohibition and the 'wowser' remain closely associated with extreme religious attitudes.<sup>42</sup> However, as Devanny and Lee's fiction contends, this is a rather simplistic image. The term 'agnostic wowser' is an odd phrase, but given the degree to which Devanny and Lee were critical of puritanism *and* the consumption of alcohol it seems a fitting contradictory phrase that sums up their positions.

In Devanny's novels heavy drinking is attached to her 'weaker' characters, such as the minor characters who conform to the questionable side of the modern jazz age in *Lenore Divine* and *Bushman Burke*. Devanny critiques alcohol consumption by associating it with inherent character flaws and genetic

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<sup>40</sup> Harper, pp. 134 – 135; 'His Majesty the Wowser - Not Yet', *New Zealand Truth*, 3 January 1920, p. 5; 'THE WOWSER (To Uncle Sam):—>' 'I've Stopped Your Grog; Here Goes for Ending Your Tobacco Joys!', *New Zealand Truth*, 17 January 1920, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> 'Teetotalism', *NZ Truth*, 8 May 1909.

<sup>42</sup> Tobias Harper has suggested that those who believed in Christianity during the 1920s have often been regarded by historians as the 'grim and repressive' wowser. Harper, p. 134. Harper makes the argument that this how whose with a belief in Christianity were viewed and does certainly not suggest that only religious people were involved with the prohibition movement. Rather his article demonstrates how this stereotypical religious figure was strongly associated with the prohibition movement.



feebleness.<sup>43</sup> Lee is more complex in commentary on drinking. While, he portrays excessive drinking as having exceptionally negative consequences, he does not suggest that it is an inherent individual flaw.<sup>44</sup> The protagonist of Lee's *Children of the Poor*, Albany Porcello, for instance, offers this description of his much beloved, but alcoholic, grandmother:

Overnight the dear old lady would become the sottish old hag, the house would grow dirty, the food would not be bought nor the meals cooked. Everyone would sneak around in silent shame; my brother and I would creep into silent corners and hope to escape notice. We hated to be called to grandmother in her sottish state. Her caresses were unlovely, vile things, and she would seem hateful.<sup>45</sup>

Albany's grandmother, Alice McDonald, is said to be aware of her problem. When sober, she is described as kind and tender, and apologetic for her drunken outbursts. When drinking, however, she becomes a different person who destroys the stable family dynamic. Alcoholism, according to Lee, is usually a personal addiction imposed through unfortunate circumstances. The blame, he believes, does not lie solely with the individual, but largely with the society that allowed the addiction to occur in the first place. Indeed, Alice McDonald's addiction is not her own fault, she tries over and over again to break it.

Regardless of the cause of alcoholism, Lee is still heavily critical of drinking.<sup>46</sup> Albany Porcello's description of the impact his grandmother's alcoholism has on his family provides a detailed and moving account of the negative affects of alcohol. Sandy MacDonald, Albany's grandfather, continuously found himself on the move around the South Island and often in debt

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<sup>43</sup> For more on how Devanny uses character to critique, what she believed to be, social issues present in 1920s New Zealand see pp. 41 - 45 of this thesis.

<sup>44</sup> For more on Devanny's use of characterisation see pp. 41 – 45 of this thesis.

<sup>45</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> The exception to this is his discussion of alcohol consumption in wartime seen in *Civilian into Soldier*.

due to his wife's drinking problem.<sup>47</sup> Albany remembers that 'two uncles were adding a modicum to the family exchequer, but her [Alice's] liquor absorbed so much of the family income that each monthly account day was dreaded.'<sup>48</sup> Despite his grandfather's skill as a baker, the family was never able to prosper or set down permanent roots because of the money Alice MacDonald spent on alcohol.

Devanny is also heavily critical of drinking. One of Devanny's most explicit and confronting references to the problems of alcohol is encapsulated in the murder of George by his best friend Bill in *The Butcher Shop*. Bill and George had been friends for years, sharing a rabbit hunting hut together. Both are well-liked in their local community, particularly by Margaret, the protagonist of the novel. Towards the start of the novel, George's drinking increases as he gets older, and becomes a daily habit rather than a weekend indulgence. He begins to experience horrible hallucinations, which results in him asking a very drunk Bill to cut off his head with an axe.

Old Bill gripped the axe, stood above his mate, swung it, and brought the blade's edge down with all his force upon the thin, scraggy neck. [...] Bill was stunned to sobriety. He trembled and muttered timidly to himself. He made a might effort to collect himself. George had had the "dingbats"; he (Bill) had been drunk. He blinked down at the headless thing upon the floor.<sup>49</sup>

Bill is unhinged by the incident and convicted to ten years hard labour, only avoiding execution because of the strong defence offered by a leading lawyer arranged by Margaret's husband.<sup>50</sup> This graphic and gruesome event highlights

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<sup>47</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, pp. 28, 57.

<sup>48</sup> Lee, *Children of the Poor*, p. 57.

<sup>49</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 90.

<sup>50</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, pp. 90–91.

the extremes of alcohol addiction, both in the sense that it causes George to get the ‘dingbats’ and Bill to act in a way he never would if sober.

For Devanny, heavy drinking and alcoholism are not only caused by social pressures, as in the case of Alle Wishart from *Lenore Divine*, but are also inherited genetic traits.<sup>51</sup> Holly Virtue from *Lenore Divine* is represented as having a weakness for alcohol because of hereditary traits handed down from his mother. At one point in the novel Holly replies to the suggestion that his drinking problem is ‘a hereditary taint’; “Yes [...] My mother died crazy from the whisky.”<sup>52</sup> Devanny’s attitudes towards ‘the demon drink’ evident in these characters reveal her views on contemporary life experiences she observed in 1920s New Zealand.

Both Devanny and Lee’s personal beliefs about alcohol consumption suggests that support for the temperance and prohibition movements did not simply come from religious fanatics. This challenges dominant contemporary portrayals of the typical ‘wowsers’. Erik Olssen and James Belich have emphasised the reductiveness of only associating support of the prohibition movement with the religious wowsers. Olssen argues that much of the backing for prohibition came from Methodists and Baptists, but that through the early twentieth century the movement increasingly used scientific rather than religious based rationales.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, James Belich posits that while moral evangelism was central to the support of prohibition, the movement did include agnostics.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Jean Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, ed. by Kirstine Moffat (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), p. 168. This is in keeping with Devanny’s attitude towards eugenics. For more on eugenics in Devanny’s fiction see Karen Charman, ‘Eugenics and the 1930’s Novels of Jean Devanny and Eleanor Dark’ (Unpublished PhD thesis: Geelong: Deakin University Australia, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 168. For more information on the links this idea has to eugenics, refer to Kirstine Moffat’s notes; Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, p. 247.

<sup>53</sup> Erik Olssen, ‘Towards a New Society’, in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Rice, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 269.

<sup>54</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 170.

Such complexities ought to be explored further given that they provide a far more nuanced view of 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. The novels of Devanny and Lee offer complex and nuanced observations written about, and from within, the period. Their writing deserves greater attention in historical scholarship. Both Lee and Devanny were critical of traditional expressions of religious devotion *and* the demon drink. As this chapter has suggested, their more sophisticated commentaries offer complex readings of the period. Indeed, in their writing ‘agnostic’ and the ‘wowsers’ are not simply binary categories, but converge in a curious, yet insightful, interplay. It is this nuanced reading that gives these novels such a rich appeal. For historians, reading the 1920s and 1930s through the ‘agnostic wowsers’ lens enables deeper examinations beyond simplistic binaries. Devanny and Lee, then, provide more than simply commentary on contemporary issues; they create contexts, characters, and events in a fictive imagination that allows them to illustrate how presumably essentialised ideas converge and collide in new ways. This is the underlying value of the novels; to more richly convey the complexity of ideas, as Devanny and Lee have, beyond the often rigidly produced sources usually available to historians.

## Conclusion

You love me, but you regard me, nevertheless, as an inferior. [...] You know that I, the individual, am your equal, but you can't separate the individual from the class. As woman I must submit myself to the man who is my keeper, for the sake of preserving male prerogatives. You, by encroaching upon another man's preserves, felt yourself a traitor to your class. I see; I see. I have learned a lot to-night. Really you are my enemy – All men are my enemies.

Jean Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*<sup>1</sup>

This thesis has demonstrated that the novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee provide a rich, archive relating to histories of 1920s and 1930s New Zealand. The novels offer contemporary insights to issues of class, gender, race and morality that have often been debated in national histories of the period. In their varied and frequent contradictory treatments of these issues Devanny and Lee's writing present social commentaries from within the 1920s and 1930s, well before they were more forcefully addressed in historical scholarship later in the twentieth century.

Chapter one addressed the literary tradition that Devanny and Lee's novels fit within as well as how these two authors have been regarded by literary scholars and historians in the past. New Zealand historians have long been alert to the value of fiction as a medium through which to discuss and understand the past. Historical analyses of New Zealand society and culture in the interwar years refer most often to John Mulgan's 1939 novel *Man Alone*. This is unsurprising given the way that this text has been used within New Zealand literary criticism. The *Phoenix* generation, publishing in the late 1930s and 1940s, self-consciously promoted modernist literature written in this period as the first distinctly 'New

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, ed. by Heather Roberts (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1981), pp. 122 – 123.

Zealand' fiction. Thus, until recently, there has been a trend in New Zealand literary criticism to imply that New Zealand literary culture emerged from a wasteland in the late 1930s. This has resulted in authors publishing prior to this movement (excluding Katherine Mansfield) often being marginalised in literary scholarship and regarded as largely derivative rather than distinctively local. This history of New Zealand literature has had a significant impact on how this period is treated in historical discourses. Chapter one argued that because the novels of Jean Devanny and John A. Lee did not fit neatly within the stylistic, and nationalist parameters favoured by the *Phoenix* generation they have generally been neglected in both literary criticism and historical scholarship.

Recent research has challenged this perception of the history of New Zealand literature by demonstrating that social criticism was not unique to the fiction of the *Phoenix* generation. Rather there has been a tradition of social criticism in New Zealand fiction from the late nineteenth century. Devanny and Lee's novels fit within this body of socially critical literature. Given their thorough critique of contemporary society, the novels produced by these authors reveal as much about 1920s and 1930s New Zealand, if not more, than Mulgan's *Man Alone*. They highlight the complex, rather than narrowly essentialist issues surrounding gender, class, race and morality during this period and are deserving of more thorough consideration by historians.

Devanny, in particular, attempted to deconstruct entrenched gender roles. Chapter two of this study focussed on this aspect of her fiction, examining the way in which her heroines look for a life beyond their position as a wife and mother. Margaret of *The Butcher Shop* takes issue with the idea of women as property, railing against those who 'think that my married state gives my husband

and my children the power of life and death over me.’<sup>2</sup> Thus, in many ways, Devanny’s novels embody the developing feminist sensibility of the 1920s. However, in constructing severe critiques, Devanny’s works also align with the conventions of the novel of social protest, which required that the repressive nature of society had to be emphasised in order for Devanny’s underlying themes to be highlighted. Therefore, her feminist rhetoric goes hand in hand with a detailed depiction of what she regarded as the oppressive, restricting and predominantly domestic lives many women led in early twentieth century New Zealand.

John A. Lee’s novels also emphasise the dominant social constructions of the cult of domesticity. His depictions of breadwinning in *Children of the Poor* portray a variety of lived experiences that engage with this dominant ideology. Similarly, Devanny’s fiction also addresses the entrenched nature of the male breadwinning ideology through highlighting the problems cause by wives’ economic dependence on their husbands. For instance, in *Poor Swine*, the protagonist, Lilian Cameron, has to make a number of personal sacrifices as her husband’s gambling becomes increasingly worse. Devanny further demonstrates how the traditional role of women in society is excessively limiting through her discussions of birth control and abortion.

While Devanny is radical in her approach to the deconstruction of women’s traditional social roles, her novels are also somewhat conservative in relation to issues of morality and female education. The majority of her heroines are all educated in the finer points of culture and socialist theory by an educated male character, never by another female. Thus, her female protagonists are not

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<sup>2</sup> Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, p. 120.

completely liberated or completely defined by conventional gender roles, reflecting contradictory and complex contemporary attitudes towards gender relations. This complexity is also apparent in historical scholarship. Some historians depict the period as one in which women became increasingly liberated, while others regard the 1920s and 1930s as a time in which women's domestic roles continued to be stressed. Devanny's fiction, in particular, is useful because it does not allow for simple binaries. Her female protagonists struggle to be seen as more than simply 'gilded' ornament[s]' trapped in a patriarchal society, and yet her fiction is so messy and contradictory, it prevents the period being essentialised. Thus, as chapter two demonstrates, her fiction allows the textured, multi-layered complexity of attitudes towards women in the 1920s to be revealed.

Devanny's works not only challenged the myth of increased equality for women but also highlights the problematic nature of contemporary assumptions regarding race relations; an issue addressed in chapter three of this study. The myth of good race relations in early twentieth century New Zealand has been steadily deconstructed by historians in recent decades, yet Devanny's critique of racist sentiment within her novels questions this myth from inside the 1920s. Devanny's use of Māori characters is radical compared to the way in which most New Zealand authors wrote about Māori in early twentieth century novels.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the love affair between Lenore Divine and Kowhatu Ngatoro - the central romantic narrative in *Lenore Divine* - is regarded as the first example of bi-racial relationship between a Māori man and a Pākehā woman within a New Zealand novel.

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<sup>3</sup> Kirstine Moffat, 'Introduction to *Lenore Divine*', in *Lenore Divine* (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), p. xxxvii.



Devanny's fiction is also unique for the historical moment in which she was writing because her Māori characters are not simply 'colonial clichés', but individual figures with agency. Devanny constructs Māori characters who are intelligent, strong and fiercely proud of their heritage. Yet, despite her radical representation of Māori, Devanny's depictions of Māori are drawn from a number of race related cultural assumptions. In particular, Devanny use terms such as 'barbarians' and 'savages' to describe Māori, even when she is attempting to be complimentary of Māori culture. For example, in *Bushman Burke*, Devanny writes that Burke 'lost himself for a moment or two in mystified admiration of this man, almost wholly white, yet clinging to, and being proudest of, the slight strain of the backward race.'<sup>4</sup> Devanny's fiction also reflects a variety of contemporary theories regarding Māori being amenable to assimilationist agendas. All the Māori characters who she depicts in a positive manner are educated and largely accept a Pākehā lifestyle. Ngaire in *Lenore Divine* states: 'I have learned much, have been taught many beautiful things by your race.'<sup>5</sup> Thus, while Devanny directly exposed the existence of racist sentiment present in 1920s New Zealand through questioning the validity of these negative social assumptions about Māori, aspects of her critique of racism are drawn from an underlying and entrenched notion of European cultural superiority. Chapter three has shown that through such an intricate and ambiguous portrayal of Māori in Devanny's novels insight into some of the complexities surrounding the nature of social attitudes towards race in early twentieth century New Zealand are revealed.

The novels of Devanny and Lee not only provide a variety of contemporary perspectives on ideas and debates surrounding gender and race, but also reflect

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Devanny, *Bushman Burke* (London: Duckworth, 1930), p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Devanny, *Lenore Divine*, ed. by Kirstine Moffat (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2012), p. 42.

attitudes towards class and social structure. Chapter four explored how Devanny and Lee depicted class within their fiction. The assumption that New Zealand was a classless society emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and was drawn from discourses linked to the 'social laboratory' and the development of an egalitarian nation. This myth has been largely deconstructed by a range of historians publishing from the late 1970s onwards. Yet, the novels of Devanny and Lee reveal that myths of equality were already being questioned and addressed in the 1920s and 1930s. Both authors examine issues of class through a socialist framework, highlighting the harsh conditions faced by those in the working classes. Lee, in particular, depicts the poverty for those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in *Children of the Poor*. As with Lee, Devanny's critique of class is taken from her own experiences and observations of the lived realities of social distinctions in early twentieth century New Zealand. These works suggest that at least some contemporary New Zealanders were aware that social, economic and class distinctions did exist in the 1920s and 1930s.

It is through the social critiques in the novels of these two authors that contemporary understandings about class and class cultures are highlighted. Thus by depicting what they viewed as the defects of capitalist in their fiction, Devanny and Lee point to the hypercritical nature of entrenched assumptions about the working classes. For the protagonist of Devanny's *Dawn Beloved* nothing is more important than removing her son from the social position that would lead him to live the cruel life of a miner. Devanny's critique is further complicated by her contradictory advocacy of social mobility. The majority of her central female characters rise above their social standing, but only through their access to education and their inherent inner worth. The insight that the novels of Devanny

and Lee offer into various contemporary understandings of class makes them valuable to New Zealand historians.

Chapter five argues that these novels are of further use to historians because they demonstrate the dangers of placing lived realities into nicely packaged binaries. Both authors were part of an emerging anti-puritan tradition in early twentieth century New Zealand literature.<sup>6</sup> However, , as with so much of their fiction, their attitudes towards issues of morality are full of seeming contradictions and ambiguities. Devanny and Lee both attack what they believed to be hypocritical and repressive social conventions. For instance, in *The Hunted*, Lee stresses the guilt many of the characters are made to feel over natural sexual impulses. Yet, on the other hand, both authors were extremely critical of alcohol consumption. Lee's description of Alice McDonald, Albany's grandmother, highlights this: '[o]vernight the dear old lady would become the sottish old hag, the house would grow dirty, the food would not be bought nor the meals cooked.'<sup>7</sup> Devanny and Lee's opinions surrounding drinking suggest that support for the prohibition movements did not simply come from religious fanatics. This challenges dominant contemporary portrayals of the typical 'wowsers' as the strict religious figure. Indeed, Devanny and Lee can be described as 'agnostic wowsers', both embodying and departing significantly from the clichéd associations of the anti-puritan. Chapter five demonstrates that through their multi-layered depictions of drinking and religion, these novels offer further insight into the nuances of life in 1920s and 1930s New Zealand.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the anti-puritan tradition in late nineteenth and early twentieth century New Zealand literature refer to Kirstine Moffat, 'Destruction, Transformation, Rebellion, Alienation: The Critique of Puritanism in Pre-1930 New Zealand Novels', *JNZL: Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 16 (2000), pp. 86 – 96.

<sup>7</sup> John A. Lee, *Children of the Poor*, 1986 ed. (Christchurch: Whitcoulls Publishers, 1934), p. 29.

The texts at the heart of this thesis demonstrate that, far from being mere ‘nonsense’, novels can provide a rich source of information and a useful window through which to examine the New Zealand past. The novels of Devanny and Lee are worthy of being readdressed by historians. They provide a way into exploring the multiple perspectives of those living in the early twentieth century and allow historians to problematize and engage with the narrative of social progression often associated with this period. What would it say about New Zealanders’ understandings of their national history if *The Butcher Shop* or *Children of the Poor* were regarded by historians as the quintessential novel of the 1920s and 1930s instead of *Man Alone*? This thesis has argued that by turning the spotlight on these frequently neglected texts a fascinating and complex picture of the period emerges; a picture that subverts simple binaries and insists that understandings of the past are multiple rather than singular. Lee and Devanny’s New Zealand is one in which women are both empowered and oppressed, free agents and domestically determined. It is one in which Māori are both valourised and reduced to cultural stereotypes, proudly independent and assimilated into Pākehā culture. It is one in which workers are both socially mobile and politically active and irreversibly trapped in a cycle of poverty and hardship. It is one in which advocates of sexual autonomy and religious freedom can also argue in favour of prohibition and against promiscuity. New Zealand in the 1920s and 1930s, as depicted by Devanny and Lee, does not fit neatly within a nationalist or progressive paradigm, but it is precisely this messiness and ambivalence which makes their fiction a valuable historical source.

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