

# Dismissing the Staff: Domestic Servants and a Historic House in Dunedin, New Zealand

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## Abstract

Whilst house museums are a relatively recent phenomenon in New Zealand, they nevertheless form an integral part not only of the history of New Zealand museums but also of New Zealand culture. As such, their present organisation reflects public historical consciousness in terms of perceptions and values that we have held and continue to hold. This article focuses on Olveston, a historic house in Dunedin,<sup>1</sup> as a case study of popular engagement with the past, and argues that a broader analysis of early twentieth-century social structure is required—one that includes the role of domestic servants in the household. It complements and supplements recent historical scholarship on house museums which argues that a more authentic and inclusive interpretation of the social relationship between employers and their servants—including class and racial antagonism—would lead to a greater connection with visitors.<sup>2</sup> Initially, I will examine the pertinent literature on house museums in general and their servants in particular, as well as questions facing historic houses, moving finally to a detailed descriptive analysis of servants in Olveston.

## House Museums

There are naturally many publications about individual house museums—guidebooks, architectural histories, social histories, and so on—but studies of the phenomenon itself are largely a development of the last quarter century.<sup>3</sup> The National Trust for Historic Preservation estimates there are between nine and ten thousand historic house museums in the United States. In contrast, a quarter of a century ago there were only about 230 in Australia.<sup>4</sup> It has been estimated that New Zealand has in total more than 140 house museums and local history museums that incorporate a historic building.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have examined the phenomenon of the house museum typically by focusing on one or a group of historic properties, predominantly in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Beyond North America, house museums in Europe have attracted less attention in English-language publications. An exception is Rosanna Pavoni's article, "Towards a Definition and Typology of Historic House Museums," which looks at the Bagatti Valsecchi Museum in Milan, of which she is the director, as an exemplar of nineteenth-century decorative art and culture.<sup>7</sup>

The literature on New Zealand house museums and domestic service is a great deal more limited and has received scant attention from New Zealand historians. Most such museums have produced short guidebooks for visitors, and *Heritage New Zealand*, the journal of the quango responsible for historic sites and buildings, contains many short items on historic properties. In his article "From Dwelling to Destination: On New Zealand's House Museums," Sebastian Clarke notes that each house has emerged as a museum for different reasons: because of its exceptional architecture, as a haven for the decorative arts, by association with a particular family, or for its importance in the history of a community. They also act as "repositories of objects, which act as agents for time travelling."<sup>8</sup> One curator with practical experience of working in a New Zealand historic house, Ashleigh Young, has described her experiences in "Katherine Would Approve: The Burden of Working at the Mansfield Birthplace".<sup>9</sup>

Accommodation for servants is rarely encountered in any but the grandest of New Zealand houses, a physical manifestation of the problem addressed by Charlotte Macdonald.<sup>10</sup> Macdonald states that there are social relations at play in regards to domestic servants across geographical and temporal spaces: “In England and Europe the history of domestic service is largely told as a story of class and migration (rural to urban internal migration or long-distance emigration), while in the United States immigration and race predominate.”<sup>11</sup> In the New Zealand context, from the earliest days of European settlement, servants were in short supply, with local women seeing little benefit in working as paid domestic labour in a society which espoused the values of egalitarianism. The solution to this shortage was recruitment of migrants from Britain.<sup>12</sup> On the question of race and why Māori were not recruited into domestic service, the answer lies in the colonial settlers’ notion of staying “white,” combined with a “European racial ideology which viewed Māori as occupying the top rungs of a race ladder and thus unsuited to servility or subordination.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Māori and Pākehā lived in two separate worlds with Māori living in autonomous rural communities.

The place of servants and their accommodation in historic houses has attracted some attention from academics, particularly in Britain and the United States. Jennifer Pustz’s 2010 book, *Voices from the Back Stairs: Interpreting Servants’ Lives at Historic House Museums*, is based on a survey of 358 house museums across the United States. Many of these museums depict the history of domestic servants, but typically in an idealised manner. Pustz states that her goal is “to help historic house museum staff reach the objective of telling the whole history of their sites through interpretation of domestic servants in a rich and complex fashion that favors the ‘real’ over the ‘ideal.’”<sup>14</sup> Pustz has recently returned to the subject with her chapter “Listening for the Silences: Stories of Enslaved and Free Domestic Workers” in Kenneth Turino and Max van Balgooy’s *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions* (2019). She finds that more house museums are beginning to portray the role of servants and argues that “by embracing the interpretation of the full spectrum of activities of resident site staff, historic house museums demonstrate that everyone’s history is important.” Servants are “a way to better represent the racial and ethnic diversity present in these households and to highlight the labor of women.”<sup>15</sup>

Laurajane Smith’s book *Emotional Heritage: Visitor Engagement at Museums and Heritage Sites* (2020) is based on interviews with visitors to museums and heritage sites in the United States, Australia, and England. Based on this empirical research, Smith poses an innovative argument that museum visitors, informed by personal history and agendas, “have agency and are not passive audiences for curatorial and interpretive messages,” and that they visit in the persona of their family culture and thus find reassurance in the affiliation with or deference to the original aristocratic inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> Linda Young’s book *Historic House Museums in the United States and the United Kingdom: A History* (2017) examines the history of house museums from a transnational perspective (the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia) in order to ascertain motivations for transforming private houses into public museums, a process she refers to as “museumization.” Young’s research reveals six “species of house museums by the motivation of their foundation”; these she calls “hero houses,” “artwork houses,” “collectors’ houses,” “social history houses,” “country houses,” and “not-very-important houses.”<sup>17</sup> Olveston would fall into the country house category as a product of multigenerational development of a house, furnishings, collections, and gardens.<sup>18</sup> However, it might just as easily be categorised as a collector’s house (in which a collection, usually of antiques or art, is central to the dwelling and where “many collectors explicitly donate the house and collection to the state, or it is offered by heirs, this stressing the personal gesture to the state”) or a social history house (houses deliberately selected to represent a strata of

society).<sup>19</sup> The Olveston website states: “Olveston is a family home of architectural and historical quality listed by the NZ Historic Places Trust [now Heritage NZ]. It is presented to visitors as a unique social history experience, a reflection of David Theomin’s drive for success and recognition, the home of a family strongly involved in the community and successful in their business ventures in early twentieth-century New Zealand.”<sup>20</sup>

In Britain, the practice of private owners opening great country houses to the public goes back centuries, a phenomenon explored by both Anna McEvoy and Jocelyn Anderson in relation to eighteenth-century tourism.<sup>21</sup> The National Trust now owns many of the more famous of these houses, and draws particular attention to the servants’ quarters at some of them, such as Berrington Hall, Cragside, Lanhydrock, Petworth, and Uppark. Another, Erddig in North Wales, is the subject of Merlin Waterson’s book *The Servant’s Hall: A Domestic History of Erddig* (1993).<sup>22</sup>

The central issues pertaining to house museums relate to historical interpretation, heritage tourism, and cultural resource management. History is a construct, the creative act of individual and collective historians. As such, individuals are free to respond to the creative product in distinctly individual ways. They may affirm, negate, or challenge a particular interpretation of the past. The question is whether historic sites should respond to the demands of visitors by opportunistically altering and modifying the historical interpretation to ensure a positive experience. If heritage is a reference point by which individuals can add perspective and meaning to their lives, it should not be presented merely to ensure harmony and consensus. The past should not be made to conform to present needs for, in doing so, historians abdicate their responsibility to present documented and defensible versions of the past. Whilst historians and heritage site managers should be concerned with ensuring that the visitor achieves a quality experience, they should not try to attain universal visitor approval. That is, they should avoid a relativist approach to historical interpretation that attempts to create a “useable past” of consensus and progress, and a source of pride in a contemporary world of turmoil and disillusionment. This is not to say historic sites can convey a “complete” presentation of the past. Instead, their responsibilities lie in presenting the past as accurately as possible, with as much detail as possible, and with methods that will engage their audience. Their success should be measured by the extent to which they provoke thought and a re-examination of the past, the nature of history, and the historical experience. They are also successful if they challenge individuals’ consciousness about their own past and stimulate memory and personal experience. In this manner, historical interpretation becomes a learning experience for the public audience.

Whilst historic sites are as varied as they are numerous, they none the less point to a common motivation: an antiquarian, often romanticised infatuation with history or a part of it. House museums in particular have tended to eulogise the past and have functioned as an outlet for the patriotic and pious urges of status-conscious elites.<sup>23</sup> As Clarke states, “many New Zealand house museums are devoted to colonial stories, often told with uncomplicated romanticism.”<sup>24</sup> The interest in historic houses such as Olveston or Larnach Castle in Dunedin offers the most tangible expression of this popular enthusiasm for the relics of the elite. The noble pile, given its intrinsic focus on a single person or family, is particularly prone to elevating the individual over his or her context without considering social, economic, and cultural factors. A broader socio-historical analysis may include the role of domestic servants in the household as a way of interpreting early twentieth-century social structure or the effects of upper-middle-class lifestyles on changing home technology. Here and elsewhere, servants, farm workers, and women have fallen most commonly into the interpretative black hole. United States National

Park Service historian Patricia West blames narrowly-defined interpretative themes and the turning of smaller domestic spaces and servants' quarters into staff work areas which are inaccessible to the public.<sup>25</sup> The segregation of the domestic working class from their upper-class employers is, therefore, reinforced today despite their fundamental role in the operation of a large home or estate. Pustz argues that in order to create an equal balance within these histories, these servants' spaces should be reclaimed for public viewing.<sup>26</sup> In being able to see how servants lived, visitors would better understand the rigours involved in domestic service.

Historic houses offer a link between local history and the public. However, historians should be careful not to make the mistake of focusing on the provenance of these houses by concentrating on ownership biographies and house furnishings. Instead of focusing on the particular, they should expand their interpretation to convey a broader social history. It should be possible to rise above the particular—which is undeniably the historic house's greatest asset—to the general, in order to engage the public with the wider social context within which the house was (and is now) situated. Historic places and sites are not one-dimensional, offering a single perspective or interpretation. Instead, they are multi-dimensional, accommodating a number of perceptions and interpretations.

By drawing on a variety of contemporary sources (for example, household manuals, photographs, or interviews with servants) one can demonstrate how house museums might contextualise the everyday lives of servants in historic houses. Also, by looking at cleaning methods or food preparation and the delivery of goods to the household, one can gain insight into the interactions between servants and homeowners. As noted above, the lives of servants can also be illuminated by tours of kitchens, pantries, and servants' bedrooms, traditionally areas closed off to visitors. As Pustz notes, “although servants may be interpreted in any room of a house museum, most often it occurs in their own work and living areas. Thus, the ability of visitors to enter or view these rooms makes a significant impact on the amount of information they receive about domestic servants.”<sup>27</sup> However, the usual visitor experience is to start with the prominent family rooms first, leaving little or no time to visit the servants' areas.

Although many historians and curators now agree that the material culture that exemplifies everyday life should be promoted, it is an inescapable fact that, just as the average person seldom leaves behind detailed archival sources such as the diaries or memoirs that would directly register his or her major concerns, the cheaply built structures of the poor seldom last as well as the masonry buildings of the elite. As a result, the heritage built on wealth, privilege, and education looms larger in the landscape than that of the commonplace. Inevitably, an unbalanced view of the past has been conserved and protected, a situation which needs to be rectified.<sup>28</sup> It is only by also conserving such things as industrial and agricultural tools, workshops, and artefacts, or structures like shearing sheds and workers' cottages, that we gain a fuller view of our heritage and of how people worked and lived.

Thomas Schlereth has noted that a “historic house possesses at least two histories: its past existence as an actual residence and its past and present life as a house museum.”<sup>29</sup> This dual nature often presents problems for the public historian as these competing components are played out in the contemporary world. The legacy of the house's material culture, and the visions of the individuals or organisations responsible for its preservation, can conflict with efforts to convey a broader historical interpretation. In New Zealand, where examples still tend to emphasise the period in which they were in use as private residences, David Hamer has built on Schlereth's model to propose that “the preserved state of a structure may be interpreted as embodying a combination of contributions from three stages or layers of history.” The first of

these is the history that is now being highlighted and made the justification for the locale's preservation; the second is the often long "age of survival" (for example, a former gentleman's residence might later become a doctor's surgery or boarding house); and the third is the modern era of existence as a "historic place."<sup>30</sup>

### **Olveston**

Olveston is a large detached inner-suburban house of thirty five rooms built in 1904–6 for the businessman David Theomin.<sup>31</sup> The Jacobean revival design was by the fashionable London architect Sir Ernest George of the firm George and Yeates, and its construction in rendered brick with limestone details was supervised by the prominent local architectural firm Mason and Wales.<sup>32</sup> George probably gave advice on suitable furnishings and furniture.<sup>33</sup> The house was built as a family home replete with fine art and artefacts purchased all around the world. Both the Theomin children (Edward and Dorothy) died childless, and the little-altered house with its original contents was given to the city in 1966.<sup>34</sup> It was among the earliest houses in Dunedin to have electricity, generated initially by a gas engine in the basement.<sup>35</sup> The house had many other modern conveniences, including central heating, an internal telephone system, and a service lift.<sup>36</sup> There are no outbuildings apart from a conservatory and a garage with covered washing area, which was added in 1915. The house largely retains its original fittings, furnishings and interior decoration.<sup>37</sup> The subsequent demolition of larger grand houses as well as the dispersal of the contents of those that survive has left Olveston as a rare representative of the wealth generated in late Victorian Dunedin and the taste of its art collectors.

Entry to Olveston is by guided tour only with six public tours daily. Each tour takes one hour and accommodates fifteen people. Olveston offers special tour options on request which can focus on particular aspects of the house and its collections (for example, architecture, Japanese travels and collections, social history, textiles, and housekeeping). Jan Davies, manager of Olveston, states: "Our one-hour tour follows a standard script as such, but we also provide specialty tours from Art to Architecture, Theomin family history and how they fit with Dunedin and the other local influential families, through to Behind the Ropes Tours."<sup>38</sup> It opened as a historic house museum in 1967 and markets itself as an authentic and original historic home depicting the life of a wealthy merchant family in the early part of the twentieth century. Visitors do not see the formers servants' bedrooms, but it is noteworthy that the hierarchy of servants was preserved at Olveston through the provision made for them. The rooms intended for the senior servants can be distinguished by their dimensions and their placement in the plan of the house.

The Theomins employed eight indoor staff, and four maids' bedrooms were provided on the top floor.<sup>39</sup> The servants' quarters have been converted into staff flats and are not open to the public as they are still occupied.<sup>40</sup> The servants who lived in comprised the cook, parlour maid, housemaid, lady's companion, and usually a butler.<sup>41</sup> Although a butler, Louis Wahrlich, was employed between 1906 and 1909, there is no evidence that a permanent butler was hired to replace him. When there were special occasions or guests at Olveston, a butler and extra servants were hired to assist with the greater workload created by additional people.<sup>42</sup> This suggests that a butler was not an essential role for everyday service at Olveston and his general duties could be carried out by other domestic staff. A laundress and gardener came daily.<sup>43</sup> After 1922, when David Theomin bought a new Fiat 510 Tourer, a chauffeur was also employed.<sup>44</sup> He lived in a separate house nearby which was acquired in 1918, there being no coach house.<sup>45</sup> Until 1920, Marie Louis 'George' Wilson, Dorothy Theomin's finishing governess, had a small suite of rooms off the back stairs on the first floor.<sup>46</sup> In the 1930s, after the death of her parents and brother, Dorothy lived alone. She employed a resident cook, parlour maid, and housemaid,

together with a lady companion, Mary Elliott. A daily laundry maid and gardener were retained. Only daily staff remained once all the resident staff left in the course of the Second World War, and Miss Theomin was occasionally reduced to doing her own cooking.<sup>47</sup>

At the turn of the century, the division of labour was well-defined by Victorian gender values that placed men and women respectively in the public and private spheres of both European and New Zealand societies. Male workers had been brought out of homes and into the public sphere, dominating the workforce and becoming the primary breadwinners for their families. Women, considered to be in need of protection from the harsh realities of the public sphere, were largely confined to the privacy of the home; working-class women made up the domestic labour force as it was a respectable sphere for them to work in.<sup>48</sup> New Zealand society, however, was different from that in England and elsewhere in that it did not have as many large estates, and therefore employed on average a lower number of domestic servants per household. The average upper-class household in the South Island employed three to four domestic servants, and the 1901 census shows that “97.8 percent of all domestic servants were employed in private dwellings with only one or two servants apiece.” By comparison, in England and Wales in 1911, “20 percent of all domestic servants were engaged in groups of three or more.”<sup>49</sup> Domestic labour in nineteenth- and twentieth-century New Zealand was, therefore, a less prominent source of employment for women than it was in England, perhaps owing to its recent colonial settlement and its less well-established history of notable residences. The shift from employing larger groups of servants was also due to the marked gender imbalance in a new society in which it was difficult to recruit and retain female labour as young women left to get married.

Servant uniforms emerged in the 1850s and 1860s and functioned to visually distinguish maids from their mistresses.<sup>50</sup> At Olveston, two different uniforms were worn in the mornings and afternoons, the first for doing general work and the second for receiving visitors. Hannah Wahrlich (née Parson), parlourmaid at Olveston between 1906 and 1908, recalled that she “wore a light print long cotton dress, in the morning, with black stockings, white collar and cuffs, and a black bow under the collar. In the afternoons [she] had black dresses, with white lace collars, cuff[s], and apron cap.”<sup>51</sup> This is a relatively plain and practical uniform that made a clear distinction between the servants and the Theomins. The practical element of the Olveston uniform is reflected in the American guide to household management, *Mrs. Allen on Cooking, Menus, Service* (1924), in which the author advises that maids should have their hair pulled back and wear comfortable shoes.<sup>52</sup> Maids worked long hours and their uniform was therefore designed to be practical and comfortable to accommodate the nature of their work.

Olveston ran in a well-managed and efficient manner where everyone knew their place and performed duties relevant to their position.<sup>53</sup> General maintenance tasks were divided among the days of the week to ensure that the house was kept clean and well-ordered. Laundry was done on Mondays; on Tuesday a man came to wind the clocks; and the cleaning of the drawing room, dining room, bedrooms, living hall, and passageways were spread throughout the week.<sup>54</sup> The working day began at five or six o’clock in the morning and ended at ten o’clock at night, meaning that life as a domestic servant involved long hours and tough work.<sup>55</sup> Work was divided among the different domestic servants, with each having their own areas of responsibility and specific duties to carry out. The parlour maid waited on tables, cleaned the silver, assisted with making the beds, and performed other light household chores.<sup>56</sup> The housemaid was responsible for the upkeep of the house, managing the bedrooms and the general cleaning of the house, and “had to contend against a host of enemies—dust, soot, smoke, rust, insects of various kinds, and bad smells innumerable.”<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the housemaid

had the important role of ensuring that the house was clean for members of the household and presentable for when visitors came, whether expected or not. The lady's maid dealt more personally with the mistress, remained within close proximity of her, and attended to her private matters. Confidentiality and discretion were essential, and her duties meant she was in one of the highest positions of female domestic service.<sup>58</sup> The salubrious elegance of the mistress was a lady's maid's prime purpose and her responsibilities included selecting and caring for her mistress' dresses and arranging her hair.<sup>59</sup>

The kitchen was the primary domain of the cook, who maintained a high level of cleanliness, prepared the meals to schedule, and oversaw the delivery of food and other goods.<sup>60</sup> A rare architectural feature of Olveston is the design of the kitchen's back window, as an alternative to a back door, through which tradesmen could pass deliveries of bread, meat, vegetables, and other parcels.<sup>61</sup> Having these deliveries made directly through to the kitchen meant that a cook did not have to contest for space in the kitchen with the comings and goings of tradesmen. The cook prepared meals to the liking of her employers and was advised to learn their taste preferences.<sup>62</sup> The Theomins regularly played host to many cultural gatherings in the first half of the twentieth century. Entertaining was an integral part of the house's story, yet walking from room to room on a guided tour does not reveal that Olveston was once a place of community and excitement.<sup>63</sup> Nor does one get a sense of the "amount of time a cook needed to prepare all the items being served and the large amount of china, silver, and crystal required to serve the meal, all of which had to be cleaned and put away before a servant could retire for the night."<sup>64</sup> However, it appears the Theomins favoured simple food for their everyday meals. An advertisement for a cook in 1921 expressed the desire for a good, plain cook and Brenda Bell (a former maid) claimed that while cooks came and went over the years, the recipes stayed the same.<sup>65</sup> As Pustz points out, "Since kitchens are the most frequently included . . . on house tours, food preparation often plays an important part in interpreting the difficulty of servants' work . . . and the visitor interest in the servant's work is due to their ability to relate to these duties in their own lives."<sup>66</sup>

A laundress was hired to work once weekly on a Monday to wash, dry, iron, and mend the linen and the family's clothing.<sup>67</sup> While not a permanent member of staff, her role was no less important than that of live-in servants as she also ensured a level of cleanliness was maintained. Finally, the butler, whether temporary or permanent, held an important position as the head of the domestic staff and carried out his key duties when the family entertained guests. A butler conferred directly with the master on the purchasing and serving of wines and was responsible for overseeing the laying of the table and the food service at dinner.<sup>68</sup> However, the butler's duties in receiving and serving guests could be carried out by the parlour maid in his absence. A 1924 advertisement for a chauffeur in the local newspaper, the *Otago Daily Times*, specifies that the applicant must be "married and strictly temperate" as well as a first-class driver and a mechanic.<sup>69</sup> Bell identifies the chauffeur as "Chapman" and claimed that he took David and Marie Theomin when they went into the city for lunch and, later, looked after their son Edward when his health deteriorated.<sup>70</sup> One gardener was called "Alexander" and his job entailed maintaining the large flower arrangements in the hall and the smaller flowers in jars and bowls in the drawing room. He often had an assistant to help with his work.<sup>71</sup>

Domestic service is an unusual form of employment in that the servant is employed privately, not by a body of people or an organisation, and the circumstances of one person's employment differed from another's.<sup>72</sup> Live-in servants received the additional benefits of food and lodgings which meant they were paid in kind as well as coin.<sup>73</sup> They had the security of being provided with food and accommodation. One parlour maid at Olveston in 1906 later recalled earning

nine shillings (around eighty dollars now) per week including keep, with an increase by one shilling after six months.<sup>74</sup> In the early 1930s, the wage rate had inflated to £1 10s (around \$150 now) per week, as well as keep.<sup>75</sup> Domestic work, though tough in nature, provided steady wages and consistent meals that would have been invaluable to single, working-class women.

The treatment of servants by employers demonstrated the nature of a class society and illustrated the divisions of households. A general distrust of servants by the upper class accentuated the divide between the classes as, consequently, servants often became resentful of their mistresses and masters. Artefacts such as locks on cupboards or doors in the household show how owners secured their property from theft by their domestic staff and illustrate this point. As Pustz observes, “Other objects built into nineteenth- and early twentieth-century houses speak to the issue of the divided household. Communication devices like call bells and speaking tubes illustrate the separation of the family and servants and the ability to have servants at beck and call through the use of technology.”<sup>76</sup>

The prominent social hierarchy of the Victorian period that clearly separated the upper class from their domestic servants carried into the society of the early twentieth century. While Olveston embodied the essence of modernity at the time it was built, it also reflected Victorian ideals of household management. However, the Theomins’ treatment of the servants, considered to be kind and generous,<sup>77</sup> demonstrates the general shift in attitudes towards the working class to acknowledge them as fellow human beings and not solely as workers.

Olveston has been an important building in Dunedin since its completion in 1906. Once home to the prominent Jewish family of David Theomin, it now functions as a snapshot of the past and the lives of its occupants that facilitates the study of history in a local context. Olveston epitomises the early twentieth century’s changing attitudes—towards modernisation, the relationship between classes in the domestic sphere, and social entertaining.

Within the house museum, juxtaposed lives of women in the early twentieth century can be studied through the understanding of a hierarchical society. Women were still relatively confined to the home and domestic sphere; however, with the employment of a moderate-sized staff, Marie Theomin increasingly ventured into the public sphere through her philanthropic work. Not having to work, Marie’s life was taken up by her volunteering and social activities. The hosting of regular “at homes” and other social occasions became common for women of the upper class. Domestic service was a common form of labour during the Victorian era and was the domain in which most working-class women worked. The home, therefore, became a place of interaction between the upper and lower classes which epitomised the nature of a hierarchical society as domestic servants were under the control of their employers. While the Theomins seem to have treated their staff kindly and with respect, this was not the experience of all domestic servants. The imbalanced position of women in an early twentieth-century class society has been reinforced by the many house museums both in New Zealand and overseas that use servants’ quarters as workspaces and offices. In closing off these sections of historic homes to visitors, an imbalanced representation of the domestic working class has been created.

## **Conclusion**

Historians are concerned with understanding the past. Those working in the heritage sector, more than most others, utilise material culture as well as the more traditional documentary, visual, and oral sources. They can add fresh perspectives to the more material-based concerns of planners, architects, and archaeologists and humanise heritage fabric through insightful

contextualisation. House museums can be particularly challenging as the evidence they provide is at once too sparse and too plentiful. They also offer a vivid example of the challenges of historical interpretation. House museums offer a prime example of the nature of the historical discipline and its focus on explanation, and they highlight the particular challenges faced by historians. How they conceptualise and communicate the past is central to our understanding of history. By reinterpreting artefacts, spaces, and the representation of domestic labour in house museums, with Olveston as a prime example, we can have a greater understanding of New Zealand's early twentieth-century social structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Dunedin is the second-largest city in the South Island of New Zealand and the principal city of the Otago region. In 1848, a Scottish settlement was established by the Lay Association of the Free Church of Scotland. Between 1855 and 1900, many thousands of Scots emigrated to the incorporated city. Dunedin became wealthy during the Central Otago gold rush, beginning in the 1860s. In the mid-1860s, and between 1878 and 1881, it was New Zealand's largest urban area.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stairs: Interpreting Servants' Lives at Historic House Museums* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Many of the substantial scholarly works on house museums are aimed at museum professionals, the most recent being *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions*, ed. Kenneth Turino and Max van Balgooy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); the last of its twenty-six chapters on different aspects of museum practice, Turino's own, is titled "Yes, America, You Need Another House Museum (But Read This Book First)." Jessica Foy Donnelly, *Interpreting Historic House Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), discusses museum programmes and provides practical information for museum professionals. In the *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2016), Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan argue that the presentation and management of historic houses need radical overhauling to make them less exclusive, inflexible, and narrowly focused. Their suggested solutions include greater visitor engagement and integration with local communities. Donna Ann Harris, in her *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), provides pragmatic guidelines and a methodology for decision-making for operators of struggling house museums, backed up with eight case studies of house museums that have changed ownership. They include Frank Lloyd Wright's Adams House in Highland Park, Illinois, Margaret Mitchell's house in Atlanta, Georgia, and Robert E. Lee's boyhood home in Alexandria, Virginia. For non-specialists, older works include Sherry Butcher-Young, *Historic House Museums: A Practical Handbook for Their Care, Preservation, and Management* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Linda Young, "House Museums in Australia," *Public History Review* 3 (1994): 167–87.

<sup>5</sup> David Reynolds, "Review of Donna Ann Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses*," *Te Ara: Journal of Museums Aotearoa Online* 32, nos. 1–2 (2007): 73, [www.museumsaotearoa.org.nz/publications/repository/te-ara-journal-museums-aotearoa-online-volume-32](http://www.museumsaotearoa.org.nz/publications/repository/te-ara-journal-museums-aotearoa-online-volume-32).

<sup>6</sup> A special issue of *The Public Historian* 37, no. 2 (May 2015) edited by Lisa Junkin Lopez looked at the topic in 2015: "Open House, Reimagining the Historic House Museum." Patricia West, in *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1999), argues that historic houses reflect the political situation of the period in which they were transformed into museums more than they do the times of their famous owners. She looks at the examples of Mount Vernon, Monticello, Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House, and

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the farm on which Booker T. Washington was born. Andrea Terry's *Family Ties: Living History in Canadian House Museums* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015) examines the nationalist and wider political agendas behind the Victorian Christmas programmes staged by three major Canadian house museums. Such romanticisation of the past, she argues, reveals the tensions involved in maintaining "artifactual accuracy" while sustaining visitor interest. Jennifer Tigert, "Welcome Home? Historic House Museums and the Culturally Selective Past" (Master of Museum Studies research paper, University of Toronto Museum Studies Program, 2000) looks at constructions of civic memory, using the example of a tenement house museum. In her thesis "The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in the United States and Australia" (PhD diss., University of Canberra, 2002), Charlotte H. F. Smith explores the "great man" and "social history" aspects of ancestor worship in house museums. She followed this with brief case studies of Monticello and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York in "Civic Consciousness and House Museums: The Instructional Role of Interpretive Narratives," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 21, no. 1 (July 2002): 74–88. Smith argues that although visitors "are encouraged to believe they are viewing balanced, socially responsible views of the past . . . in reality, interpretation continues to be defined by the rituals of civil religion: worship, pilgrimage and the contemplation of transcendent collective purpose" (74). Smith points out that at Monticello, "the interpretative focus was expanded to incorporate the presence [of] slave and free plantation workers after 1980" (86), also pointing out that "their presence remains peripheral to the hero's" (that is, Thomas Jefferson; 81). Slavery is an important consideration in the presentation of historic houses in the southern United States, as is explored by Joy Theresa Summar-Smith in "Interpretation of Slavery in Southern Historic House Museums" (MA diss., Baylor University, 2003). Another historically controversial subject is tackled by Hilary Iris Lowe in "The Queerest House in Cambridge," *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (2019). She makes a case study of the Longfellow House in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in order to reposition historic house museums as sites of LGBTQ public history. She argues that "by taking up queer history openly and discussing sources and the research process as part of any interpretation . . . a much more vital, engaging, and honest picture of the lives lived within the walls of our homes" will be uncovered. In England and Wales, the National Trust explored the LGBTQ history of some of its properties in 2017 with its "Prejudice and Pride" programme; National Trust, "Exploring LGBTQ+ History at National Trust Places," [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/prejudice-and-pride-exploring-lgbtq-history](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/prejudice-and-pride-exploring-lgbtq-history). This attracted some opposition from the membership, the Trust being "accused of being excessively politically correct"; Steve Bird, "National Trust Facing Membership Boycott Over Gay Campaign," *Daily Telegraph*, August 4, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Rosanna Pavoni, "Towards a Definition and Typology of Historic House Museums," *Museum International* 53, no. 2 (2001): 16–21. The cultural significance of the Goethe House in Weimar to German nationalism is discussed by Paul Kahl in "Goethe—Nation—Museum: Goethehäuser als Symbolorte der deutschen 'Kulturnation'" [The Goethe houses as symbolic sites of the German "cultural nation"], in *Die Musealisierung der Nation. Ein kulturpolitisches Gestaltungsmodell des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Constanze Breuer, Bärbel Holtz, and Paul Kahl (Berlin: Oldenbourg/De Gruyter, 2015), 43–56. Despite its title, Linda Young's *Historic House Museums in the United States and the United Kingdom: A History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) includes examples from Australia. Other work on Australian house museums has mainly appeared in unpublished theses. In "House Museums as Sites of Memory" (MA diss., University of Canberra, 2005), Susan Webber investigates the memory experiences of visitors to Calthorpes' House in Red Hill (a Canberra suburb), a modest, middle-class, servantless home built in 1927. Prompted by her own experiences as a guide in a house museum, she examines the role of smells, sounds, and familiar objects in triggering memories among visitors. The ways in which these experiences are important to them, she argues, can inform the set-up, interpretation, and publicity of house museums in ways which will attract new visitors and help to engage with visitors' interests. Anna Mei Ling Wong, in "Keeping House for Different Masters: History, Heritage and House Museums in Australia" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2007), looks at a range of historic places in New South Wales: Susannah Place, Hyde Park Barracks, the first Government House, Elizabeth Bay House, Vaucluse House, and Rouse Hill House (Sydney); and Elizabeth Farm and Experiment Farm Cottage (Parramatta).

<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Clarke, "From Dwelling to Destination: On New Zealand's House Museums," *The Pantograph Punch*, July 20, 2018, 2–3, [www.pantograph-punch.com/post/house-museums](http://www.pantograph-punch.com/post/house-museums).

- <sup>9</sup> Ashleigh Young, “Katherine Would Approve: The Burden of Working at the Mansfield Birthplace,” in *Can You Tolerate This? Essays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
- <sup>10</sup> Charlotte Macdonald, “Why Was There No Answer to the ‘Servant Problem’? Paid Domestic Work and the Making of a White New Zealand, 1840s–1950s,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 51, no. 1 (April 2017): 7–35. See also her chapter “Strangers at the Hearth: The Eclipse of Domestic Service in New Zealand Homes c.1830s–1940s,” in *At Home in New Zealand: Houses, History, People*, ed. Barbara Brookes (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2000), 41–56.
- <sup>11</sup> Macdonald, “Why Was There No Answer to the ‘Servant Problem’?” 8.
- <sup>12</sup> Macdonald, 9. The demand for domestic help remained consistent throughout the 1840s to 1950s, and during this period shortages of domestic help were meant to be solved by immigration, principally from England, and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland; Macdonald, 13.
- <sup>13</sup> Macdonald, 10.
- <sup>14</sup> Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stairs*, 12. This book draws on her thesis, “The Servant Problem: Historic House Museums and Social History” (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2004). An appendix (204–5) provides a select bibliography of literature on domestic service and working women in the United States and includes seven works on domestic servants in houses open to the public.
- <sup>15</sup> Jennifer Pustz, “Listening for the Silences: Stories of Enslaved and Free Domestic Workers,” in *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions*, ed. Kenneth Turino and Max van Balgooy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 162. The role of servants in historic houses is examined by Elizabeth L. O’Leary in *From Morning to Night: Domestic Service in Maymont House and the Gilded Age South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), which considers a Richmond millionaire’s residence over the period 1893–1925, and by Mary Alice Molloy, in her short essay *Prairie Avenue Servants: Behind the Scenes in Chicago’s Mansions, 1870–1920* (St. Clair Shores, MI: Palindrome, 1995). Bonnie Hurd Smith considers “Women’s Voices: Reinterpreting Historic House Museums” in *Her Past Around Us: Interpreting Sites for Women’s History*, ed. Polly Welts Kaufman and Katherine T. Corbett (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2003). A rare Irish perspective is given by Margaret Lynch-Brennan in the same volume: “The Servant Slant: Irish Women Domestic Servants and Historic House Museums,” 124–30.
- <sup>16</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Emotional Heritage: Visitor Engagement at Museums and Heritage Sites* (London: Routledge, 2020), 3, 218–19.
- <sup>17</sup> Linda Young, *Historic House Museums in the United States and the United Kingdom: A History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 10–11.
- <sup>18</sup> Young, 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Young, 11.
- <sup>20</sup> The Theomin Gallery Management Committee [Olveston], “The History of [the] Gift,” accessed April 13, 2022, [www.olveston.co.nz/about/history](http://www.olveston.co.nz/about/history).
- <sup>21</sup> Anna McEvoy, “Following in the Footsteps of 18th-Century Tourists: The Visitor Experience at Stowe over 300 Years,” in *The Country House: Material Culture and Consumption*, ed. Jon Stobart and Andrew Hann (Swindon: Historic England, 2015), 187–95; Jocelyn Anderson, *Touring and Publicizing England’s Country Houses in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).
- <sup>22</sup> Merlin Waterson, *The Servants’ Hall: A Domestic History of Erddig* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1993). There is an extensive literature on domestic service in British country houses; see Oliver Cox, “The ‘Downton Boom’: Country Houses, Popular Culture, and Curatorial Culture,” *The Public Historian* 37, no. 2 (2015): 116; Pamela Sambrook, *Keeping Their Place: Domestic Service in the Country House, 1700–1920* (Stroud: Sutton, 2005); Pamela Sambrook, *The Servants’ Story: Managing a Great Country House* (Stroud: Amberley, 2016), which looks specifically at Trentham Hall, the Staffordshire home of the dukes of Sutherland, in the early Victorian period; Jessica Gerard, *Country House Life: Family and Servants, 1815–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Jill Franklin, “Troops of Servants: Labour and Planning in the Country House 1840–1914,” *Victorian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1975): 211–39.
- <sup>23</sup> M. Wallace, “Visiting the Past. History Museums in the United States,” in *Presenting the Past: Essays on the History and the Public*, ed. S. P. Benson, S. Brier, and R. Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 137.
- <sup>24</sup> Clarke, “From Dwelling to Destination.”

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<sup>25</sup> Patricia West, “Interpreting Women’s History at Male-Focused House Museums” in *CRM* [Cultural Resource Management, US National Park Service] 20, no. 3 (1997): 8–9. Australian historian Marilyn Lake observes that in the absence of historians, “a public history has flourished which is politically conservative, elitist and masculinist—a history centred around our nineteenth-century hero—the self-made man.” For a discussion of the role of women, domesticity, and historic homes, see Marilyn Lake, “Historical Homes,” in *Packaging the Past? Public Histories*, ed. J. Rickard and P. Spearritt (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1991), 46–54 and West, “Interpreting Women’s History,” 8–9.

<sup>26</sup> Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stairs*, 143.

<sup>27</sup> Pustz, 48.

<sup>28</sup> For further discussion on this topic, see Thomas J. Schlereth, “Material Culture Research and Historical Explanation,” *Public Historian* 7 (Fall 1985): 21–36. While house museums have a wealth of material that relates to the upper-class occupants, there is scant evidence about the lives of servants who worked in them. In New Zealand, the short-term employment of servants meant that their lives were not deeply embedded in the history of the house. This can, however, be obviated by examining the role of servants in the home and their interactions with objects and artefacts pertaining to their employment. See Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stairs*.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas J. Schlereth, *Artifacts and the American Past* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1981), 115. It is interesting to note that Olveston has now been a museum longer than it was a private home.

<sup>30</sup> David Hamer, “Historic Preservation in Urban New Zealand,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 31, no. 2 (1997): 253–55.

<sup>31</sup> David Theomin married Marie Michaelis in 1879.

<sup>32</sup> “Olveston Historic Home,” accessed June 15, 2022, [www.olveston.co.nz/explore-olveston/the-home-and-the-architect](http://www.olveston.co.nz/explore-olveston/the-home-and-the-architect). The plans are dated October 1903 and the city council’s building permit was issued in early 1905. Work on the interior continued into mid-1907; Margery Blackman, *Dorothy Theomin of Olveston: Mountaineer, Photographer, Traveller & Benefactor* (Dunedin: Friends of Olveston, 2007), 17–19.

<sup>33</sup> Blackman, *Dorothy Theomin of Olveston*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> “Olveston Historic Home.”

<sup>35</sup> Linda Burgess, *Historic Houses: A Visitor’s Guide to 65 Early New Zealand Houses* (Auckland: Random House, 2007), 301.

<sup>36</sup> “Olveston Historic Home.”

<sup>37</sup> The few changes are detailed by Blackman, *Dorothy Theomin of Olveston*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Personal correspondence with Jan Davies, Manager Olveston Historic Home, May 20, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Olveston Historic Home, “The Parts of Olveston You Do Not See,” accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.olveston.co.nz/explore-olveston/olveston-stories/the-parts-of-olveston-you-do-not-see>.

<sup>40</sup> Olveston Historic Home, “The Parts of Olveston You Do Not See.”

<sup>41</sup> Blackman, *Dorothy Theomin of Olveston*, 20.

<sup>42</sup> Mervyn Palmer, “The House Ran on Oiled Wheels” (unpublished document, archived at Olveston Historic Home, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Blackman, *Dorothy Theomin of Olveston*, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Brenda Bell, “Life in Olveston” (personal communication, archived at Olveston Historic Home, September 10, 1976); “Former Olveston Maid Looks Back on Service,” *Otago Daily Times*, May 29, 1967.

<sup>45</sup> Olveston Historic Home, “The Parts of Olveston You Do Not See”; Blackman, *Dorothy Theomin of Olveston*, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Blackman, *Dorothy Theomin of Olveston*, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Blackman, 61.

<sup>48</sup> Jeremy Black and Donald M. MacRaild, *Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 250; G. R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War 1886–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 55.

<sup>49</sup> Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society, 1850–1900* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989), 86.

<sup>50</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed* (London:

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HarperCollins, 2003), 113.

<sup>51</sup> “Former Olveston Maid.”

<sup>52</sup> Ida C. Bailey Allen, *Mrs. Allen on Cooking, Menus, Service: 2500 Recipes* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924), 870.

<sup>53</sup> Bell, “Life in Olveston” (personal communication).

<sup>54</sup> Flanders, *Victorian House*, 106; “Hannah Parson” (personal communication, archived at Olveston Historic Home, n.d.).

<sup>55</sup> Flanders, *Victorian House*, 100.

<sup>56</sup> Elsie Burch Donald, ed. *Debrett’s Etiquette and Modern Manners* (London: Debrett’s Peerage Limited, 1981), 353.

<sup>57</sup> *The Domestic Service Guide: to Housekeeping; Practical Cookery; Pickling and Preserving Household Work; Dairy Management; The Table and Dessert; Cellarage of Wines; Home-Brewing and Wine-Making; The Boudoir and Dressing-Room; Travelling; Stable Economy; Gardening Operation, etc; being A Handbook of the Duties of Housekeeper, Housemaid, Footman, Cook, Laundry-Maid, Coachman, Lady’s-Maid, Dairy-Maid, Groom, Nursery-Maid, Butler, Gardener, Valet* (London: Lockwood and Co., 1865), 252.

<sup>58</sup> *Domestic Service Guide*, 188.

<sup>59</sup> *Domestic Service Guide*, 190.

<sup>60</sup> Flanders, *Victorian House*, 102.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Helen Berry, “The Architectural and Social History of ‘Olveston’, 1902–1906: A Study of Edwardian Modernity” (MA diss., University of Otago, 2009), 296.

<sup>62</sup> *The Domestic Service Guide*, 119.

<sup>63</sup> Clarke, “From Dwelling to Destination.”

<sup>64</sup> Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stairs*, 54.

<sup>65</sup> Brenda Bell, “Life in Olveston,” *Otago Daily Times*, November 4, 1921, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stairs*, 54.

<sup>67</sup> *Domestic Service Guide*, 262; M. B. Maunsell, “Mrs Gertrude Annie Day” (personal communication, archived at Olveston Historic Home, n.d.).

<sup>68</sup> Donald, *Debrett’s Etiquette*, 456; *Domestic Service Guide*, 296.

<sup>69</sup> *Otago Daily Times*, March 10, 1924, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Bell, “Life in Olveston” (personal communication).

<sup>71</sup> Bell, “Life in Olveston” (personal communication).

<sup>72</sup> Aban B. Mehta, *The Domestic Servant Class* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1960), 146.

<sup>73</sup> Mehta, *Domestic Servant Class*, 147.

<sup>74</sup> “Former Olveston Maid”; “Last Surviving Member of Olveston Staff Tells . . .,” *Evening Star*, April 19, 1969.

<sup>75</sup> Blackman, *Dorothy Theomin of Olveston*, 21; Sylvia Coutts, “Letter to G. D. Barron,” November 26, 1991 (personal correspondence, archived at Olveston Historic Home).

<sup>76</sup> Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stairs*, 127.

<sup>77</sup> Bell, “Life in Olveston.”