

Through Shaded Glass: Women and Photography in Aotearoa New Zealand: 1860–1960

By Lissa Mitchell

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Reviewed by Catherine Hammond

In 1924 the Eastman Kodak Company proclaimed that with one of its cameras in your home you could capture “the most fascinating of all stories . . . *the story of us*” (p. 239). *Through Shaded Glass: Women and Photography in Aotearoa New Zealand: 1860–1960* tells another story of “us”: that of women’s engagement with photography in Aotearoa, from the earliest known images taken here in the nineteenth century, until the point at which the gender divide begins to break down in the twentieth. Lissa Mitchell’s exhaustive research over the past decade has revealed the names and expanded the stories of nearly 200 women, many previously unknown, who worked in photography here between 1860 and 1960.

Told through six themed chapters, but with a clear focus on raising the visibility of individual women, *Through Shaded Glass* is a photographic and feminist history. Mitchell, curator of historical photography at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, also provides an illuminating socioeconomic and class context to these women’s stories. She presents us with a world of female entrepreneurs, of middle and working-class women juggling family and photographic professional lives that is a clear corrective to perceived notions of who created images in this era. These vignettes are interspersed with the many previously unpublished images by women photographers, unearthed by Mitchell through a forensic investigation of both public and private collections.

Photography’s invention around 200 years ago was a thunderbolt, and the technology quickly spread around the world. The first commercially available format was the daguerreotype which was launched in Paris in 1839, and while some photographs were certainly taken (or attempted) in Aotearoa in the 1840s, the first few surviving examples in our public collections date from the early 1850s. This new ability to capture an image of what was in front of you with a “machine” was revolutionary, and its coincidence with colonisation meant photographers—with their focus on portraits and outdoor scenes for an audience back “home”—became both documenters and tools of colonial settlement.

By the time Mitchell’s story begins, in 1860, photography was a global phenomenon and a lucrative local industry. Its rapid boom attracted both men and women to try their hand at it. Married couples with little experience in photography might open a studio and endeavour to build a business before quickly moving on to other enterprises. Elizabeth Pulman (1836–1900) had one of the few sustained practices. After being widowed, she maintained a studio in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland from the 1870s through the 1890s while raising nine children. Pulman’s images of Māori, including King Tāwhiao, were a major part of her studio’s income, and she fought hard to retain control and copyright of these portraits which were often mass produced for the tourist market (the sitters themselves having little say in the matter).

What is perhaps lesser known in this early period is the ways in which women were employed within photography studios. Mitchell elucidates the inherent value of women to the business of photography, with their presence at a studio seen to facilitate propriety (a woman client could therefore safely be photographed alone) and help to put customers, especially children, at ease. The women themselves, however, faced the all-too-familiar dangers of assault and exploitation within the workplace. The fine technical skills required for hand-colouring,

retouching and other methods that manipulated a print or negative were seen as suitable work for young women, and many jobs were advertised as such. This continued well into the twentieth century, with women doing detailed, and uncredited, post-production work from home as well as within larger studios. Mitchell highlights the value of their input, and reframes photography as a collaborative exercise, with both the image-maker and the image-manipulator playing a critical role in the final product.

The rise of amateur photography from the 1880s onwards was driven by technological shifts, as access to smaller cameras and easier processing opened up photography to a wider public. Kodak's portable cameras, preloaded with roll film, were increasingly advertised to women as a prime market: the "memory keepers" of the family whose duty it was to ensure that all the key moments were captured. This interest in amateur photography drove the development of camera clubs throughout the country, beginning in Dunedin, and most accepted women members from the late 1890s. Nina Hill (1877–1934) diarised her almost daily endeavours photographing friends and family at Fernhill in Hawkes Bay, and Winifred Couper in Marlborough produced images of farm life, such as the lyrical *Amy Couper in the Cosmos* (1915).

The impact of first wave feminism, with women in Aotearoa achieving the historic right to vote in 1893, ushered in a raft of societal and attitudinal shifts, which were also felt within photography. Mitchell tells the story of the Moore sisters, May (1881–1931) and Mina (1882–1957), who ran their own studio in Wellington and Sydney, employing only women. Their 1910 full-length portrait of Mākereti Papakura (Te Arawa, 1873–1930), in the collection of the National Library of Australia, shows her holding a Kodak camera and wearing a korowai, and exemplifies the Moores' uplifting of women. Papakura's own practice is ripe for more research.

Another major impact on New Zealand photography in the first half of the twentieth century was the arrival of European émigré photographers in the 1930s. They introduced modernist ideas and the concept of a "New Photography." This represented a dramatic shift from the formerly popular Pictorialist style, with its sepia tones and soft edges, and instead introduced hard edges, pattern and dramatic lighting and cropping. Among this group was Jewish German refugee Irene Koppel (1911–2004). She faced discrimination, surveillance and the confiscation of equipment during wartime New Zealand, but continued as a commercial photographer regardless until the 1960s. While working at Wellington's Spencer Digby Studios, much of her work was uncredited (although she noted on her own cuttings in scrapbooks which images she had taken). Her architectural photography is particularly striking and was published in magazines such as *Home and Building*.

The democratisation of photography in the twentieth century did not destroy the business of professional studios. On the contrary, studio portraits of families, bridal groups or individuals remained a cultural fixture until well past 1960. While many women's careers within photographic studios remained brief, there were exceptions, such as Ramai Hayward (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāi Tahu, 1916–2014), the pioneering photographer and film-maker who had studios in Devonport and Auckland in the 1930s and 1940s, and Amy Harper (1900–1998), who owned Belwood Studios for over 40 years and was Auckland's most reputable and popular bridal photographer up until the 1970s.

Through Shaded Glass is rich in detail, so the list of women's names by chapter, glossary of terms and thorough index are valuable tools in navigating the content. The 100-year period in question is not necessarily evenly covered by the texts—Mitchell follows where the research

takes her in this regard—and she laments that she was not able to discover more wāhine Māori photographers. This is an area of research that can be built on thanks to the groundwork Mitchell has laid, and surely speaks to the nature of our public collections whose nineteenth and twentieth-century holdings are dominated by Pākēha-focused narratives. Mitchell’s book is a major achievement. As with the recent publication *Making Space: A History of New Zealand Women in Architecture* (Massey University Press, 2022), *Through Shaded Glass* fills a significant gap in the existing literature and celebrates the contribution of so many previously unsung women makers.