

Women photographers in the Turnbull Library

JOAN McCracken & JOHN SULLIVAN

Photography has been lauded since its inception as a faithful mirror of reality. 'The camera does not lie' has taken its place in our treasury of clichés, and few would query the evidence of a photograph as a true record of all portrayed therein. Nevertheless, the camera can mislead, if not by deed then by omission, as can be demonstrated by a consideration of the Turnbull Library Photograph Collection. A member of the public who spent a week browsing through the public file of prints might form some interesting conclusions about nineteenth century New Zealand. It would become apparent that, although Maori and Pakeha of both sexes and all ages found their way into photographers' studios in considerable numbers, the only people who indulged in any form of meaningful activity were European males.

This distortion in our visual record has several causes. Photographs of the Maori were, at least in the early period of European settlement, taken mostly on the initiative of the photographer, who would have had at least half an eye to the saleability of the image. There are, therefore, many photographs of Maori men and women with their moko prominent and often artificially accentuated, but very few of Maori agriculture of the nineteenth century. Commercial considerations also played their part in limiting the documentation of women in New Zealand society as a whole. Professional photographers relied on the sale of prints to survive, and the prints which sold were those showing spectacular scenery or the commercial and agricultural activities which supported the economy. Women were not generally accorded a public place in these industries and hence rarely appear in such photographs.

Limitations in photographic equipment and technique also contributed to the dearth of photographs of women's activities. With the slow photographic emulsions of the period, house interiors were rarely able to be photographed, and such images as do exist were taken on long exposures which erased all trace of human activity. Domestic activity went largely unrecorded until more rapid photographic materials became readily available towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The presence of women on the other side of the lens is equally poorly recorded,¹ yet women have been active in amateur and pro-