

Helen Martin, Sam Edwards. *New Zealand Film, 1912-1996*. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1997. vi + 215 pp. \$NZ49.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-558336-6.



Reviewed by Caroline Daley

Published on (June, 1998)

In 1945 a New Zealand film critic, Gordon Mirams, claimed that if there was such a thing as "New Zealand culture" it was "to a large extent the creation of Hollywood." According to Mirams, only drinking tea was more popular in New Zealand than going to the movies. Official statistics back him up. For many years New Zealanders were amongst the most frequent movie goers in the western world, but few of the films they went to see were made at home. From 1940 until the early 1970s, for example, only a handful of features were shot in New Zealand. In *New Zealand Film, 1912-1996*, Helen Martin and Sam Edwards offer a comprehensive filmography of the feature films that managed to be made during film's first century in New Zealand.

In many respects, *New Zealand Film* is a simple book. After a brief chronology of New Zealand cinema, the two authors provide standardised information on each film. Although complete information is not always available, especially for early films, they list the film's title and production company, note any financial assistance or budgetary information, give the main locations used,

note who the distributor was, and record the censorship rating and running time, before providing information on directors, producers and other significant members of the crew. Cast credits follow this. Then a synopsis of the film is offered and at the end of the page-long entry any awards the film has won are listed. Each entry is illustrated, more often than not with a still from the film. The authors divided up the films by chronology. Edwards wrote all of the entries for the pre-1976 films, while Martin deals with the vast majority of the films made in the last 20 years.

Readers might expect this to be a slim volume, given how few films were made in the 40s, 50s and 60s, but Edwards and Martin have managed to find 162 New Zealand feature films to write about. The reason they found so many has to do with the ways they define New Zealand feature film. As they rightly note, over time the definition of feature film has altered. The film usually assumed to be the first feature made in New Zealand, George Tarr's 1914 adaptation of the Hinemoa legend, was less than 4000 feet long, the standard archival definition of a feature film, but

at the time was a "feature," and thus deserves to be included here. This seems perfectly acceptable, but their decision to also include non-dramatic features over 60 minutes in length seems less tenable. Feature-length documentaries are not feature films. Telefeatures and video features are not theatrically released films, yet they are included in this book. It strikes me as odd that Sam Neill and Judy Rymer's *Cinema of Unease: A Personal Journey by Sam Neill* (1995), a 56 minute documentary about New Zealand film, sits alongside films like Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993).

The inclusion of *The Piano* raises another problem with the authors' desire for inclusiveness. How much of a New Zealand input does there have to be for a film to qualify as a New Zealand feature film? Martin and Edwards are guided by the 1978 Film Commission Act here: if there is "significant New Zealand content" in terms of the film's creators, production team, cast, financiers, copyright holder or even equipment and technical facilities, then it is a New Zealand feature film. While this seems incredibly broad, the authors widen the definition even further to include films with "significant New Zealand association(s)" (p. 3). Hence, *The Piano*, set and shot in New Zealand although financed overseas, deserves to be included. *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* (1984), the Japanese prisoner-of-war-camp film with David Bowie and Ton Conti, is also here, since tax loopholes in New Zealand were exploited to make this and several other films during the early 1980s. I remain unconvinced that these sorts of films are New Zealand feature films. It also strikes me as bizarre, given Martin and Edwards' desire to be inclusive, that they have excluded "adult movies" (p. 1). We still wait for a history of the local porn film and video industry.

Aside from concerns about definitions, the plot synopses and brief editorial comments on each film are useful additions to the literature on New Zealand film. The heavy reliance on Maori as actors and exotic colour in most of the pre-talkie

films in New Zealand is striking. It is a pity that more is not said about this. Edwards notes that Maori "provided characters and sets which lent those early movies not only a unique and exotic appeal, but some superb actors as well" (p. 28). The fact that no footage of any pre-1922 film is known to remain does not seem to faze him, but he seems reluctant to go further in his analysis. The fact that these films never allowed white women and Maori men to be romantically involved, for example, is not commented on. Instead film makers like Rudall Hayward, who others have argued portrayed Maori as either static contemporary figures, or members of a dying race, are presented as respecting Maori (p. 30). Little is offered to support such contentions.

There are many missed opportunities here. The absence of any discussion of New Zealanders' film-going habits, the pervasive influence of Hollywood genres on the feature films that were made in New Zealand, the impact of other leisure forms on film making, all seem worthy of discussion. While New Zealand Film fills in some of the gaps, there is still a need for more analytical work on the development and history of film making in New Zealand.

Copyright (c) Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at [#uninitialized#](#)

Citation: Caroline Daley. Review of Martin, Helen; Edwards, Sam. *New Zealand Film, 1912-1996.* , H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2113>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.