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# Signifier of Kiwi Identity: Would the Real Buzzy Bee Please Step Forward

LINDSAY NEILL AND MARILYN WARING

While Aotearoa New Zealand's first people, Māori, have populated New Zealand for almost one thousand years,<sup>1</sup> since the nation's colonisation during the 1840s, people from Aotearoa New Zealand have come to be known by many identifiers. Those identifiers have included 'Pākehā, Kiwi, Fernlander[s] and Māorilanders'<sup>2</sup> as well as 'Anzac, Digger, Moalander, even Pig Islander[s]'.<sup>3</sup> It was not until the First World War that 'Kiwi' became a popular identifier of people from Aotearoa New Zealand. Like many other socio-cultures, Kiwi identity is enhanced by materiality. In Aotearoa New Zealand, that materiality is known as 'kiwiana'.

Most items of kiwiana hold nostalgic connotations. Those connotations link kiwiana to the male-centric worldview values<sup>4</sup> developed during the nation's colonisation, as well as within the period in New Zealand's history known as 'the golden weather'.<sup>5</sup> The golden

weather lasted between 1949 and 1965, a period that realised unprecedented and sustained economic growth. That growth reinforced the nation's mythologised egalitarianism and through economic 'plenty' created a nostalgic point in time that is commonly referred to as 'the good old days'. The good old days are fondly remembered because they were a time when you could leave the front door to your home unlocked and nothing untoward would happen. Today, items of kiwiana, including the Buzzy Bee, reflect that nostalgic rose-tinted view of being Kiwi and perpetuate many of the Kiwi characteristics inherited from early settler culture.

As a material item reflecting Kiwi identity, the Buzzy Bee is an actant metaphor of industry and effort. That industry and effort reflects the actions of early settlers who cleared the land and established the nation's business infrastructure.<sup>6</sup>

As Figure 1 shows, the Buzzy Bee is a brightly coloured – red, yellow, black and blue – pull-along child's toy. The Bee is fourteen centimetres in length with a wingspan of seventeen centimetres. As the Bee moves forward, its yellow paddle wings rotate, its sprung antennae vibrate and the Bee makes a curious clicking sound. That sound derives from a short vibrating metal bar, similar to a music box prong. The noise is activated as the wheels of the Bee turn and the short metal bar hits a protrusion on the Bee's wheeled axel.



Figure 1: The Buzzy Bee

Prompting this paper was a live radio interview. In July 2018, Lindsay Neill was invited to discuss Kiwi identity and kiwiana by popular radio host Wendyl Nissen. During that discussion, he was asked about the Buzzy Bee's origin. Based on accepted literature, he proposed that the Buzzy Bee was a derivative of a toy produced in the United States of America by Fisher-Price.

By chance, Wendie Hall, the Chief Executive Officer of Lion Rock, which is the registered owner of the Buzzy Bee (in New Zealand), was listening to that broadcast. Hearing the conversation and my reference to Fisher-Price, Hall made contact to tell me that the connection he had made between Fisher-Price and the Buzzy Bee was incorrect. Intrigued, he arranged for us to meet. At the meeting, Wendie Hall gave Lindsay a digital video disc (DVD) that contained an interview with Betty Schlesinger. The interview was captured in 2005/2006 when Schlesinger, then aged 92, was living in a retirement village. On the DVD, she recounted a new Buzzy Bee history. As Schlesinger recalled, it was her husband, Maurice Schlesinger, who first developed the Bee. His plan was to have the Buzzy Bee ready to sell for the Christmas of 1940. Consequently, our paper used the oral history narrative and recollections of Betty Schlesinger to tell a revised history of the Buzzy Bee origins.

Oral histories, like Betty's, reflect the essence of Yow's observation that memory can reveal the 'gist of an event – that is, the most important, core information about the event ... although peripheral details may be forgotten'.<sup>7</sup> However, memory may not be a reliable vehicle. As Hobsbawm observed, 'most oral history today is personal memory which is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts'.<sup>8</sup> However, Thompson, and later Batty, proposed that memory's reliability is positively correlated with the interest a subject has in a topic.<sup>9</sup> Simply stated, the greater the relationship, the more reliable the memory. Consequently, while we acknowledge that memory accuracy can be compromised, we also propose that Betty's narrative and interview represent her recollections as a person who had a strong association with the Buzzy Bee's genesis.

Until this research, consequent to the radio interview that uncovered Betty Schlesinger's account of the Buzzy Bee, two other narratives have dominated its history. The first posits that Kiwi salesman Hector Ramsey developed the Bee. The second narrative proposes that the Buzzy Bee was derived from a similar pull-along toy developed by American toy

giant, Fisher-Price. While this paper explores those narratives in the following sections, we take the position that both the Hector Ramsey and Fisher-Price narratives are spurious, and that Betty Schlesinger's account is the legitimate history of the Buzzy Bee.

To understand the Buzzy Bee's narrative, this paper is presented within the following sections. The first section presents an overview of Kiwi identity. Then, an overview of kiwiana is presented emphasizing the Buzzy Bee. Having established those backgrounds and the connection between them, this paper progresses with Betty Schlesinger's account of the Buzzy Bee's development. From Schlesinger's interview data and direct quotes, this paper challenges existing popular conceptions and the literature promulgating the Fisher-Price and Hector Ramsey Buzzy Bee connections.

In concluding that the Buzzy Bee was created in New Zealand, and not the United States, or by Hector Ramsey, this paper reinforces the link of authenticity between national identity and the materiality supporting Kiwi identity.

#### **KIWI IDENTITY**

In the history of Aotearoa New Zealand's settlement, 'Māori [were the] first human inhabitants'.<sup>10</sup> Durie noted that 'DNA studies ... seem to confirm that a significant colony of Māori settlers was firmly established some eight hundred or so years ago'.<sup>11</sup> Bentley proposed that the European settlement of Aotearoa New Zealand began in the late 1700s.<sup>12</sup> However, it was not until the 1840s when the New Zealand Company brought the first registered migrants to New Zealand that the country's population began to grow with some speed.<sup>13</sup> New Zealand was promoted to potential migrants as a 'rural idyll [ideally suited to] the bourgeois Victorian family [and as] a labourer's paradise'.<sup>14</sup> Part of the lure was the potential to own land.<sup>15</sup> A new start in a new land, and the possibility of owning land, combined to produce a mythologized classless, egalitarian society.<sup>16</sup>

Art captured these possibilities. John Gully's watercolour, *The Valley of the Wilkin from Huddleston's Run*, 1877 (Figure 2), depicts a lone person sitting amid a vast landscape. At the time, these images were appealing because they contrasted with the overcrowding that many migrants were experiencing in their homelands.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 2:** *The Valley of the Wilkin from Huddleston's Run*, John Gully, 1877.<sup>18</sup>

During the early European colonization of New Zealand, three factors contributed to early Kiwi identity: the dominance of men,<sup>19</sup> the lack of women<sup>20</sup> and the tyranny of distance.<sup>21</sup> Those factors, particularly the tyranny of distance, fostered innovative early-settler thinking. As Phillips remarked, 'men appear to have a knack of turning to anything'.<sup>22</sup> That knack was anchored in physicality. As Phillips observed, male settlers were 'suspicious of undue specialisation and the technical learning which might underpin it'.<sup>23</sup> The physicality necessary in clearing the land and 'making do'<sup>24</sup> facilitated the cult of 'mateship'<sup>25</sup> between men in no-nonsense ways.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, a male-centric worldview emerged.<sup>27</sup> At that time, as Wray noted, land played an important role in settler identity:

First, it [the land] distinguished New Zealand from England by providing a unique natural habitat for species that were found nowhere else in the world. Second, the wilderness landscapes enabled New Zealanders to showcase their outstanding natural heritage (in contrast to the cultural/built heritage of England). Third, wilderness embodied the pioneering ethic of adventure and exploration, which helped to define New Zealand settler society and to distinguish it from Europe. And finally, wilderness symbolised two of the fundamental values of early New Zealand

society that were believed to be lacking in England: freedom and egalitarianism.<sup>28</sup>

However, land ownership differences between settlers and Māori came to hold and sustain negative outcomes for Māori.

Rashbrooke observed that with Māori land loss came ‘harmful effect[s] on Māori social and economic development’.<sup>29</sup> Today, many of those consequences are being addressed through the Waitangi Tribunal claims processes.<sup>30</sup> Yet settler culture and settler land ownership have laid the foundations for Pākehā identities.<sup>31</sup> Owning land, being male and maximizing physicality ensured that traits including mateship, innovation, maleness, physicality and ‘making do’ were important components of emergent identity themes and characteristics. Over time, many of those attributes have become mythologized. ‘Making do’ and innovation became prized traits during the government-imposed period of self-sufficient austerity that occurred in post-World-War-Two New Zealand that then led into the period of ‘golden weather’.

As Sands and Beverland observed, ‘Kiwi’ has become a positive contemporary identifier for describing people from Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>32</sup> Many settlers in the 19th and early 20th centuries came to New Zealand to clear the land, undertake commerce and to establish Westernized infrastructure.<sup>33</sup> Reflecting Phillips’ earlier observations,<sup>34</sup> sociologist Claudia Bell added that New Zealand’s contemporary idealized male traits are traceable to that time:

‘Kiwi ingenuity’ matches a longstanding well-celebrated New Zealand myth about creative problem solving. In remote New Zealand, anything needed could not always be obtained locally. Rudimentary tools were used to craft available materials to serve practical ends: a ‘No. 8 wire mentality’. No. 8 wire was a standard gauge fencing wire ... such ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) attitudes historically arose from necessity in a settler society. In true vernacular style and practice settlers gave priority to function. These terms continue to hold currency.<sup>35</sup>

Before its adoption as a national identifier, ‘kiwi’ referenced a flightless bird with ‘mole-like vision, cat-like whiskers and a shaggy plumage more like hair than feathers’.<sup>36</sup> As an identifier of people, ‘Kiwi’ became popular during World War One. Then, it described soldiers from New

Zealand. The Kiwi/soldier connection can be traced back to William Ramsay, the inventor of Kiwi-branded boot polish (Figure 3).<sup>37</sup> Museum curator and historian Richard Wolfe estimated that following World War One, 30 million cans of Kiwi nugget had been sold globally.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 3: Kiwi boot polish<sup>39</sup>

However, prior to 1915, the kiwi bird had been incorporated into the New Zealand Army's military heraldry. As Elizabeth Mildon, Assistant Curator of Heraldry at the National Army Museum, Waiouru, commented:

The 2nd (South Canterbury) Regiment was formed on 17 March 1911, changing its name to the South Canterbury Battalion, which was made up of rifle volunteer units. There are images of the South Canterbury Battalion badge in both D. A. Corbett's book *The Regimental Badges of New Zealand* and Geoff Oldham's *Badges and Insignia of the New Zealand Army*. Corbett dates the badge at 1886 whereas Oldham has it at 1903. This badge features the Maltese cross with the kiwi in the centre and went on to become the WWI cap and collar badge for the 2nd (South Canterbury) Regiment. From this date onwards, the kiwi features regularly on New Zealand badges both official and

unofficial. The kiwi is still used on badges today for the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment.<sup>40</sup>

Because of war and Kiwi-branded nugget cans, Wolfe commented that: ‘the obvious association was made, and everyone began calling the New Zealander[s] a “kee-wee” ... by the time another World War came around, “Kiwi” was second nature’.<sup>41</sup>



Figure 4: *Making Feathers Fly*<sup>42</sup>

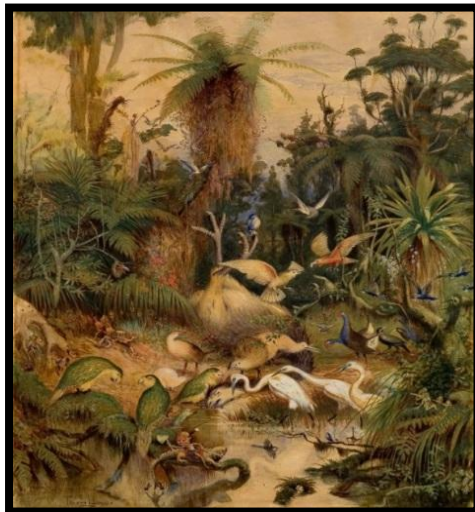


Figure 5: *Death of a Moa*, Trevor Lloyd<sup>43</sup>

The ascription of the identifier ‘Kiwi’ to people from New Zealand was compounded and presented in banal ways. That banality subtly reinforced Kiwi’s potency as an identifier.<sup>44</sup> Exemplifying this, and reflecting the continuation of the naming rights bestowed by Kiwi boot



polish, was art. Two examples illuminate this. The first, a piece of war art from World War One, depicts a determined 'NZ' Kiwi impaling three surprised and disarrayed turkeys on its beak. The symbolic meaning, given the Gallipoli campaign, is clear. The second artwork, Trevor Lloyd's *Death of a Moa*, shows a triumphant Kiwi standing on the corpse of a dead moa. Again, the symbolism is important, possibly reflecting the notion that, through war, New Zealanders' attitudes and perceptions of self were now associated with something uniquely New Zealand (the kiwi). Consequently, through art it could be realised that being Kiwi inferred a determinism and independence of self, one contrasting the mortifying remains of Empire symbolically represented by the moa (something not only dead, but extinct, a salient contrast to the Kiwis' vitality).

That notwithstanding, and reflecting the potency of identity politics, sociologist and cultural identity researcher Avril Bell noted:

[The] appropriation of indigenous authenticity to give substance and distinctiveness to their own nationalist identity claims [suggests that] settler peoples are 'inauthentic' Others in relation to both the metropolitan/European and the indigene of the societies in which they live. They do not have ready access to a European identity. Nor are they able to easily claim an authentic belonging to and identity within their homelands ... In addition, they appropriate indigenous authenticity as a key figure in the assertion of their own cultural distinctiveness/authenticity.<sup>45</sup>

Katherine Wilkin-Slaney suggested that using 'Kiwi' as an identifier of people attributed endangered species status upon them.<sup>46</sup> Offering a possible solution, Wilkin-Slaney wondered if an introduced bird, rather than an indigenous one, may not have been a better choice.<sup>47</sup>

Today, the image of the kiwi and the use of the term 'Kiwi' are common and popular.<sup>48</sup> Reflecting that, a Colmar Brunton survey revealed that 96% of 1009 respondents identified as being a Kiwi/New Zealander.<sup>49</sup> The survey also noted that 70% of respondents held strong, positive feelings about being Kiwi. This suggests that, while Avril Bell

and Wilkin-Slaney cautioned against Kiwi's use,<sup>50</sup> using Kiwi bypasses the bifurcated natures of Pākehā and Māori identities. Consequently, Kiwi could be perceived as an identifier of convenience assuaging the politics of identity and the social inequities within Pākehā and Māori identifiers. Kiwi can also be embraced by new migrant groups.

While Kiwi has political meaning, Kiwi also holds appeal, as an identifier, to Māori. In recognition of kiwi as a Māori word, the Colmar Brunton survey revealed, 'people of Māori descent (81 per cent) ... identified most with being a Kiwi'.<sup>51</sup> Kiwi holds the potential to create a more inclusive imagined community.<sup>52</sup> As Avril Bell reflected, it 'is not based on knowing our fellow New Zealanders, but on *imagining* our connection to them'.<sup>53</sup>

Another *New Zealand Herald* survey in 2016 reinforced many of the previous survey findings of 2014.<sup>54</sup> However, the 2016 survey identified some new information. This included Aucklanders' self-ascribed attributes of being outdoorsy, innovative and of holding pride in cultural diversity. Aucklanders' also believed that they were less friendly and less Kiwi than other New Zealanders. The 2016 survey's findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Kiwi attributes, negatives and pride themes from a 2016 *New Zealand Herald* survey (N=1007)<sup>55</sup>

| Kiwis are (positives)  | % agree | Kiwis are not (negatives) | % agree | Kiwis have pride in | % agree |
|------------------------|---------|---------------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|
| Friendly               | 79      | Intellectual              | 45      | Natural beauty      | 90      |
| Proud                  | 74      | Sophisticated             | 14      | Outdoor access      | 84      |
| Can do attitude        | 73      |                           |         | Can do attitude     | 84      |
| Care about environment | 68      |                           |         | Laid back lifestyle | 68      |
| Easy going / laid back | 67      |                           |         | Sports achievement  | 68      |
| Determined             | 67      |                           |         | Safety              | 58      |
| Outdoorsy              | 64      |                           |         | Equality            | 56      |

In concluding this section, Kiwi can be understood as a self-ascribed contemporary identifier of people from New Zealand. Kiwi also

references an indigenous flightless bird. Kiwi is also a brand name: Kiwi boot polish.<sup>56</sup> Kiwi also holds military connections.<sup>57</sup> The characteristics of being Kiwi are linked to the country's early settlers, especially men. Over time, the Kiwi identity came to reflect a male-centric worldview. Mateship exemplifies that connection and view. Kiwi's self-ascription promotes the point that Kiwi may be an identifier of preference for many New Zealanders. That preference, supported by research,<sup>58</sup> deflects the politics of identity ascribed to Pākehā and Māori. Consequently, Kiwi potentializes identity choices for all New Zealanders inasmuch as it provides anyone living in or identifying with New Zealand the choice to use it. Therefore, Kiwi invites the potential for a wider sense of community, incorporating ethnic differences and encompassing Pākehā and Māori.

#### **KIWIANA: KIWID IDENTITY'S MATERIALITY**

Anthropologist Charlotte Seymour-Smith noted that material culture was about 'the sum or inventory of the technology and material artefacts of a human group, including those elements related to subsistence activities as well as those which are produced for ornamental, artistic or ritual purposes'.<sup>59</sup> Ian Woodward suggested that material culture explored 'how apparently inanimate things [objects, artefacts] within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity'.<sup>60</sup> In their research on fashion, Crane and Bovone recommended that material culture can be explored in the following ways:

- By exploring material culture as text expressing ways of being within cultures
- In considering how materiality and its meaning are conveyed through media
- By asking how collective meaning is conveyed within cultures through material items
- In considering how people negotiate their own meanings of materiality cognizant of 'the symbolic values attributed to material culture by producers of material culture' [and]

- By exploring, in different locations, ‘cross-national studies of symbolic values expressed in material goods and of the systems that produce them in order to reveal differences in the types of symbolic values’.<sup>61</sup>

Consequently, Crane and Bovone and Woodward have recognized that, within vernacular experiences, people in general and researchers in particular have ‘increasingly acknowledge[d] the embeddedness of “things”’.<sup>62</sup> In that way, the symbolic meaning of an item reflects the relationship between it and people. Actancy reflects the dynamic between ‘things’ and people.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, ‘things’, or materiality, hold biographies incorporating actancy and symbolic meaning.<sup>64</sup> In that way, material culture links the nature of ‘things’ and how those ‘things’ help people to make sense of their world. Consequently, materiality links ‘things’ to Berger and Luckmann’s social construction of reality.<sup>65</sup> Reflecting that, Hicks proposed that materiality and actancy, bridge the gap between ‘things’ and being human.<sup>66</sup>

Best exemplifying actancy, symbolic meaning and the relationship between things and people was a participant within Claudia Bell’s research.<sup>67</sup> Bell’s participant noted, in reference to her accumulation of 1950s Kiwi collectables, that:

I am re-creating an idealised New Zealand childhood. I wanted a 1950s place, and to fill it with 1950s things. When I go there it’s like acting out a fantasy about family holidays there, decades ago. It’s like I’ve bought myself a national back-story or autobiography in material form. Whatever happens in the future, it is my own little world, even though it is modelled on myths about another world, 1950s New Zealand.<sup>68</sup>

In this way, material items support identity. Everyone comprising a culture – and the culture itself – reserves a special place for such items. In New Zealand, that materiality and those links are generated by items of ‘kiwiana’. Australiana, Shakespeareana, Victoriana, Americana and kiwiana all denote, via ‘-ana’, ‘a collection of objects or information relating to a particular individual, subject or place’.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, kiwiana is the materiality reflecting a Kiwi identity. As Richard Wolfe and Stephen Barnett suggested, kiwiana ‘celebrate[s] ... those quintessential customs and artefacts this country has made its own’.<sup>70</sup>

Kiwiana provides positive ‘symbols of the nation [within] material objects’<sup>71</sup> that are ‘imbued with accumulated meanings’.<sup>72</sup> Claudia Bell considered kiwiana to be important because it differentiated New Zealanders from all others.<sup>73</sup>

Lindsay Neill proposed that kiwiana evoked emotions of times past rather than future times and possibilities.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, Claudia Bell and Neill affirm that kiwiana is important because it provides reassurance through materiality, reinforcing New Zealanders’ perceptions of self and their wider place in the world.<sup>75</sup> Kiwiana’s material meaning for Claudia Bell is ‘one way of accumulating artefacts of Pākehā history and Pākehā experience, to claim [an] identity’.<sup>76</sup> Yet within Bell’s words lies a linguistic anomaly: if kiwiana reflected being Pākehā, then surely it should be called Pākehana? Linking kiwiana to a Kiwi identity not only aligns it linguistically, but it also provides wider choice and possibilities for inclusion; Māori, Pākehā or anyone else choosing to use Kiwi as their identifier of choice is able to do so.

An unofficial catalogue of kiwiana exists. For Wolfe and Barnett, kiwiana includes Wattie’s peas, Ches ‘n Dale (cartoon characters in a processed cheese advertisement), bungy jumping, rugby, grass, sheep, pōhutukawa (a flowering native tree), the godwit (migratory native bird), New Zealand (the country), kiwi (the bird), number 8 wire, Buzzy Bee (a toy), sheep dogs (specifically ‘Dog’ from the cartoon *Footrot Flats*), ice cream, pāua (a native abalone shellfish), cabbage trees, corrugated iron, the Edmonds logo (baking products), Four Square shops, jandals (rubber footwear), Lemon and Paeroa (soft drink), New Zealand Railways cups, the silver fern, the Swannndri (outdoor clothing), the Taranaki gate (a makeshift type of farm gate), Weet-Bix (cereal), the colour black (and the All Blacks) and the bach or crib (holiday house).<sup>77</sup>

Adding to this, Florek and Insch contributed the ‘chocolate fish, hei tiki (a Māori greenstone neck pendant), Marmite (a dark salty spread) and ... the koru [a spiral shape resembling a fern frond]’ as kiwiana.<sup>78</sup> New Zealand Post, through stamp issue, have recognized ANZAC biscuits, a barbecue, a chilly bin (portable ice box), chocolate fish, fish and chips, hot-dogs, kiwifruit, a Lilo (inflatable mattress), a meat pie, pavlova (a meringue dessert), pipis (shellfish) and Ugg boots as kiwiana (Figures 6 and 7).<sup>79</sup>



Figure 6: New Zealand Post 1994 kiwiana stamp issue.<sup>80</sup>



Figure 7: New Zealand Post Millennium kiwiana stamp issue.<sup>81</sup>

Claudia Bell described kiwiana as ‘popular cultural items that distinctly reference New Zealand [that were] locally manufactured items originating mainly in the 1940s-1950s, when import restrictions limited the availability of household goods.’<sup>82</sup> Carlyon and Morrow speculated that after World War Two innovation was important, because ‘returning to a comfortable life of plenty was not immediate, for either veterans or the general populace’.<sup>83</sup> Then, a comparatively closed economy and the nation’s geographical isolation fostered a conservative worldview.<sup>84</sup> Brickell best encapsulated this view of the times as follows:

Until the mid-1990s it was argued that the New Zealand of the 1940s was a uniformly dull and conformist society which was harsh on dissenters and which labelled women who wished to remain engaged within the public sphere in preference to homemaking and child raising as ‘deviants’.<sup>85</sup>

While popular considerations, Fiona McKergow challenged those notions, proposing that a deeper understanding of the 1940s and 1950s was necessary.<sup>86</sup> McKergow's view was supported by Labrum's observation that post-war New Zealand was 'riven with contradictions, tensions and ambiguities'.<sup>87</sup>

Additionally, Carlyon and Morrow suggested that at that time a more liberal way that actively challenged the existing order of things was percolating underneath a convenient veneer of conformity.<sup>88</sup> Many items of kiwiana were consolidated within the Kiwi psyche when 'the country basked in a long spell of golden [economic and social] weather'.<sup>89</sup> Consequently, items of kiwiana have come to symbolize that period in a rose-tinted retrospective view of life in Aotearoa New Zealand that has been embodied within being Kiwi.<sup>90</sup> For example, linking the Buzzy Bee toy to the industriousness of New Zealand's golden weather period<sup>91</sup> evoked not only that time but also the industriousness necessary to clear the land in the early period of the country's European settlement.<sup>92</sup>

In those ways, the Buzzy Bee and Wattie's Industries have come to reflect the resurgence of turning your hand to anything, the mateship of work, and being innovative.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, the Swannndri as kiwiana has become a signifier of hard manual work that not only reflects the physicality of the European settlers who cleared the land, but more contemporarily the farmers, Power Board employees and forestry workers who choose to wear it in the present day.<sup>94</sup>

However, Claudia Bell has suggested that 'Māoriana is a subcategory of this [kiwiana]'.<sup>95</sup> In doing so, she has reflected the country's bifurcated identity hierarchy supporting Pākehā dominance.<sup>96</sup> But there is a changing face and demographic of Aotearoa New Zealand. In work currently in press, Lindsay Neill proposes a new range of kiwiana based on the inputs of new migrants to New Zealand.<sup>97</sup> Neill revealed that being Māori, Māori culture and te ao Māori (the Māori world) are not only seminal constructs within Kiwi identity, but for Neill's study participants, primal indicators of Kiwi identity and kiwiana.<sup>98</sup> In that way, Neill's new list assuages the claims of appropriation noted by Māori lawyer and academic Ani Mikaere.<sup>99</sup> As Mikaere observed:

Little wonder that Pākehā New Zealand struggles with the question of identity, seeking to create cultural icons of gumboots, black singlets, pavlova, kiwifruit and the Buzzy Bee toy. When travelling overseas Pākehā leap forward to perform bastardised versions of the haka and ‘Pokarekare Ana’ and adorn themselves with Māori pendants in an attempt to identify themselves as New Zealanders.<sup>100</sup>

#### FISHER PRICE AND THE BUZZY BEE

Despite evidence to the contrary, the Fisher-Price Buzzy Bee connection and Hector Ramsey associations continue to receive support. While this paper excludes those possibilities, the *raison d’être* for this article includes their repetition. Donna Chisholm, writing in *North & South* magazine in 2018, is one author still repeating Wolfe’s<sup>101</sup> earlier claims:

The pull-along children’s toy was made by Auckland brothers Hec and John Ramsey in the 1940s, but in his book *Crikey! Talk about Kiwiana*, Richard Wolfe says the idea actually came from a toy made by Fisher-Price in New York.<sup>102</sup>

In her article, Chisholm noted other design icons that she had observed in a new book on New Zealand design authored by Michael Smythe. Had Chisholm<sup>103</sup> looked up the Buzzy Bee in that text (*New Zealand by Design*),<sup>104</sup> she could have added a new layer to the Buzzy Bees’ narrative, rather than repeat the Fisher-Price story. In his book, Smythe is clear: ‘there is no truth in the rumour that the American flat-sided Fisher-Price Buzzy Bee came first’.<sup>105</sup> Specifically, ‘Fisher-Price itself states that its product was manufactured from 1950’.<sup>106</sup> Predating the 1940s origins claimed by Chisholm’s article, Smythe stated that the Buzzy Bee emerged as a consequence of Maurice Schlesinger’s formation of the business, Playcraft Products, in 1939.<sup>107</sup> Smythe goes on to state that Schlesinger and Playcraft continued production of the Bee until Maurice’s illness forced a halt to production.<sup>108</sup>

Smythe was also clear about the Hector Ramsey connection. He stated that Hec Ramsey, ‘[b]eing an empathetic sort, and/or an opportunist, took the samples [he was selling on behalf of Schlesinger, through the company C.L. Stevenson] to his brothers wood turning



business in New Lynn and set about satisfying market demand',<sup>109</sup> supposedly after the collapse of Playcraft. This paper supports Smythe's claim<sup>110</sup> by adding direct quotes of confirmation from Maurice's wife, Betty Schlesinger. Those quotes not only reinforce Smythe's position, but also discount the Hec Ramsey connection. It is through the combination of Smythe and Betty Schlesinger's quotes, as noted here, that final clarity is brought to the myth of origin surrounding the Buzzy Bee. However, the following section explores Hec Ramsey's connection to the Buzzy Bee.

#### **HECTOR RAMSAY AND THE BUZZY BEE**

In their 2001 book, *Kiwiana! The Sequel*, Wolfe and Barnett noted the Bee's origin:

In 1994 an Aucklander claimed he had personally introduced the Ramsey's to a toy bee brought back from the United States by his sister's mother-in-law. The bee in question was described as flat, wooden, and covered in printed paper and therefore sounding very much like an earlier version of the Fisher-Price's 1950 toy.<sup>111</sup>

In the same volume, Wolfe and Barnett proposed that:

[a] worker at the Ramsey's factory recalled the incident, claiming this American bee had been shown to the boss in 1948, and within three months the company was in production, supplying batches of up to 10,000 [bees].<sup>112</sup>

In an earlier work, *New Zealand, New Zealand! In Praise of Kiwiana*,<sup>113</sup> Barnett and Wolfe noted that after turning out millions of 'wooden cores for toilet rolls' and then 'developing the Mary Lou doll in 1941', John Ramsey joined his brothers' company after his Second World War demobilization.<sup>114</sup> Then, John was 'instrumental in designing the Buzzy Bee and sourcing the tawa from which it was made'.<sup>115</sup> That narrative has been repeated, almost verbatim, on the website *Otorohanga: Kiwiana Town*.<sup>116</sup>

Otorohanga is a provincial town in New Zealand's north island. The town has adopted Kiwi identity and kiwiana as its point of difference for locals and tourists. While that embrace increases kiwiana's actancy,

information on the town's website also perpetuates refuted myths of origin, particularly those related to the Buzzy Bee.

On *Christchurch City Libraries'* webpage about kiwiana, they have noted:

[Buzzy Bee](#) – created by Auckland brothers Hector and John Ramsay and has been produced since its first release in the mid-1940s. Hec Ramsay first ventured into toys with the release of the famous Mary Lou doll. One of the enduring images of the buzzy bee is [Prince William playing](#) with one on a visit with his family to New Zealand.<sup>117</sup>

Mediating those narratives, the *Te Papa, the Museum of New Zealand* website states:

The first Buzzy Bees were made in about 1940 by Maurice Schlesinger but went out of production in the early 1940s after Maurice became unwell with spinal meningitis. Hec Ramsey, a travelling salesman started producing the Buzzy Bee and Mary Lou doll soon after when he discovered a gap in the market.<sup>118</sup>

As *Wikipedia* related:

The **Buzzy Bee** is a popular [toy](#) in [New Zealand](#). It resembles a [bee](#) with rotating [wings](#) that move and make a clicking noise while the toy is pulled along the ground. Possibly based on an earlier American concept,<sup>[1]</sup> it was designed and first produced in New Zealand in the 1930s, by [Maurice Schlesinger](#).<sup>[2]</sup> It became popular during the [post-war baby boom](#). Its bright colours and clicking sound call are familiar to many New Zealanders, making it one of the most well-recognised items of [Kiwiana](#).<sup>119</sup>

Aware that Ramsey was a travelling salesman for C.L. Stevenson and had as part of his portfolio Schlesinger's Buzzy Bee, it is likely that, as Smythe suggested,<sup>120</sup> Ramsey either through benevolence or opportunism took over Bee production when Schlesinger's Playcraft business ceased because of Maurice's illness.

### THE REAL BUZZY BEE STEPS FORWARD

Until this research, two narratives dominated the Buzzy Bee's origin. The first suggested that the Buzzy Bee was developed by Fisher Price in the United States. The second proposed that the Bee was developed in New Zealand by Hector and John Ramsay. Challenging those narratives is the data collected from Betty Schlesinger's interview.

Maurice Schlesinger (1907–1980) met Betty (1915–2009) in the mid-1930s. After an engagement the couple married. As was the norm then, Betty Schlesinger kept house. Then, as children arrived, she tended to their care. Maurice Schlesinger was the family breadwinner. He found employment as a businessman. However, he soon realised his entrepreneurial tendencies. In doing so, in 1939 he set up Playcraft Products. His company's goal was to design and develop toys. Like many Kiwis of his day, Maurice Schlesinger had survived the Great Depression (1929–39). That experience heightened his abilities to 'turn his hand to anything', to make do and to innovate. Those traits were part of Maurice Schlesinger's 'infinity of traces'<sup>121</sup> that linked back to settler culture. As Betty Schlesinger noted:

Maurice was very good at anything. He ran businesses and shops. He always made things and had good ideas.

Many of Maurice's ideas maximized his keen mind and reflected themes of scarcity and abundance, particularly the scarcity of raw materials and the abundance of Maurice's entrepreneurial thinking. Betty recounted those factors:

He invented a three 'n one highchair, a thermos and a pushchair [as well as the Buzzy Bee]. He played around with plywood to make wheels [for the pushchair and highchair]. Then, there was a shortage of wheels and rubber. He found that a nine-ply [wooden] wheel worked and coated it with rubber.

Adding to those inventions was the Buzzy Bee. Betty Schlesinger recalled that Maurice Schlesinger:

Made the Buzzy Bee around 1940 [just] in time for Christmas.

Maurice Schlesinger got the idea for the Bee after visiting a friend's carpentry workshop. There he noticed some off-cut, turned, wooden balustrade supports. Noting what he saw as a head, thorax and abdomen, Maurice Schlesinger had a picture in his mind of a bee. It was not long before he began the Buzzy Bee's production. Betty Schlesinger remembered that Maurice Schlesinger manufactured it in the Playcraft Products' workshop:

[In] St Benedict's Street, right opposite the church, it's a carpark now ... he took one of the stables [there] ... he had a friend who used to come in and help. The painting was done by Bill Filmer ... he did all the shop lettering and posters in those days. He put the faces on the bees. Maurice did the background painting, and he [Bill] did the faces.

Unlike today, manufacturers like Maurice Schlesinger did not have the advantage or capabilities of the Internet. To get products into shops, many businesses at that time used travelling salesmen. Travelling the country, these salesmen carried samples of various goods in large suitcases. Stopping off at retail outlets, the travelling salesman showed retailers their range of goods and took orders for them. Those orders were then passed on to the manufacturers. In that way, the travelling salesman mediated the relationship between retail outlet and manufacturer. Busy producing and painting his Bees, Maurice Schlesinger contracted the distribution services of the company C.J. Stevenson. C.J. Stevenson, who were located in Emily Place in Auckland, employed Hector Ramsay as one of their travelling salesmen.

However, things changed for the worse for Maurice Schlesinger. In 1942, he developed meningitis and was hospitalized. His recovery was slow. Illness meant that his entrepreneurial streak was also put on hold. Betty Schlesinger remembered:

It was his baby [the Bee] but he had to shut it down.

With Maurice Schlesinger's slow recovery, it was some time before the couple's life returned to normal. On recovery and driving along Auckland's Karangahape Road, Maurice Schlesinger noticed something

that was very familiar to him in a shop window. There, a Buzzy Bee held pride of place. Curious at his find and wondering where the Bee came from, he parked and entered the shop. There, he asked for the store's manager. However, his enquiry about the Bee's origin went unanswered. The store's manager would not disclose where he had purchased the Bee. Betty Schlesinger recounted:

Later Maurice saw a Buzzy Bee in a shop in the K' Road. He wondered where that came from ... but the man, shop owner, wouldn't say where he got the bee from, or anything.

While Betty Schlesinger gives us an exclusive insight into the development of the Buzzy Bee, her narrative about her husband's association with the Bee ends there. While she speculated that Hector Ramsay took over the Bee, and literature supports that, any ongoing role that the Schlesingers played in the Buzzy Bee's production and development has been lost to history. As Betty Schlesinger concluded:

When Maurice came right, he started selling real estate.

While Betty's narrative clarifies the origins of the Buzzy Bee, it also reflects something else – Kiwi identity. Particularly, Betty's narrative shows us how maleness and the pioneer attributes of being Kiwi were exemplified by her husband Maurice. Maurice's ability to 'turn his hand to anything' reflected his 'infinity of traces'<sup>122</sup> connecting him with the 'can do', physicality and spirit of innovation that New Zealand's early settlers created as a hallmark characteristic. Reflecting Maurice's own socio-temporality, having lived through the depression, he realised the importance of innovation by re-using waste materials (a balustrade support) that he creatively visualised as a Buzzy Bee body.

In developing the toy within that mindset and way of being, Maurice embodied the key attributes associated with being Kiwi. Arguably, in creating the Buzzy Bee, Maurice literally imbued a child's toy with the characteristics of hard work and innovation that many might associate with the bee as an enterprising and industrious insect. Within those considerations, Maurice Schlesinger's development of the Buzzy Bee can be realised as the encapsulation of actant meaning and

emotion within a material item that, over time, has become an icon of kiwiana.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of our article was to clarify the fictive history of a kiwiana favourite: the Buzzy Bee. Until now, multiple myths of origin have surrounded the Buzzy Bee. It was not until the combination of Michael Smythe's book *New Zealand by Design*<sup>123</sup> and the fortuitous gift of Betty Schlesinger's interview on DVD to this research team, that the mystery of the Buzzy Bee could be solved. Our research reveals that Maurice and Betty Schlesinger designed, developed, manufactured and distributed the Buzzy Bee – via the company, C.L. Stevenson, who employed Hector Ramsey as a travelling salesman – from 1940. Betty Schlesinger's narrative and direct quotes within this paper confirm this and support Smythe's position.<sup>124</sup> It is through the combination of chronology and Betty Schlesinger's recollection that we propose a revised history of the Buzzy Bee.

In recognizing that revision, our work also confirms many Kiwi traits. Maurice Schlesinger was entrepreneurial, able to turn his hand to anything and 'make something from nothing'. Consequently, our article reinforces many socio-temporal Kiwi attributes that were key to Maurice and Betty Schlesinger's own socio-temporality which still permeate Kiwi culture today. This tells us something about Maurice and Betty that is still alive within contemporary Kiwi culture: the ability to be innovative. However, one outstanding question remains: did the Fischer-Price Buzzy Bee derive from Maurice Schlesinger's Bee? Is it possible that American soldiers stationed in New Zealand took Maurice Schlesinger's Buzzy Bee back home to the United States, and the Fisher Price bee was then developed?

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