

# TEENAGERS THE RISE OF YOUTH CULTURE IN NEW ZEALAND CHRIS BRICKELL



‘With a broad social and cultural sweep, the book brings young people to the centre of the New Zealand story.’ – Bronwyn Dalley, co-author of *Frontier of Dreams: The Story of New Zealand*

‘Panoramic in its scope, with a wonderful teeming sense of past lives and sensibilities.’  
– Melissa Bellanta, author of *Larrikins: A History*

*Teenagers* is a ground-breaking history of young people in New Zealand from the nineteenth century to the 1960s. Through the diaries and letters, photographs and drawings that teenagers left behind, we meet New Zealanders as they transition from children to adults: sealers and bushfellers, factory girls and newspaper boys, the male ‘mashers’ of the 1880s and the female ‘flappers’ of the 1910s and ’20s, schoolgirls and rock’n’rollers, larrikins and louts.

By taking us inside the lives of young New Zealanders, the book illuminates from a new angle large-scale changes in our society: the rise and fall of domestic service, the impact of compulsory education, the movement of Pākehā and then Māori from country to city, the rise of consumer culture and popular psychology. *Teenagers* shows us how young people made sense of their personal and social transformations: in language and song and dress, at dances and picnics and social clubs, in talking and playing and reading.



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## Introduction **Finding the Teen Age**

Gertie Brookes moved from the country district of Wharehine to Auckland, a bustling city of 35,000 people, in 1889. The sixteen-year-old found somewhere to live, took up a job as a domestic servant and told those back home about her new life. Gertie's letters to her close friend Ella Marsh described her experiences. 'I like this place pretty much but there is too much work', she wrote. 'I know I won't be able to do it for very long. I keep the house scrubbed as white as it can be, of course I come in for all the heavy work.'<sup>1</sup> While Gertie toiled like an older woman, her youth asserted itself in ways that she found irritating, such as the rash of pimples on her face.<sup>2</sup> She inhabited the space between childhood and adulthood as her young body assumed grown-up burdens.

There was more to life than hard work, though: Gertie's letters tell of socialising with the young men of Auckland. 'If I go to G'ma Lichfield's there is a young man there 20-something he is, he is a lodger at G'ma's, if I go to Aunty Lizzie's, there is Stan & Percy if I go to Charlie's place over at Avondale there is a young man lives with him.' Gertie often found herself the centre of attention – and she wondered how to cope: 'I shall have to ask your advice Dear Ella what must I do,

OPPOSITE A book and a hammock on a sunny afternoon in Otago, c. 1918.



## TEENAGERS



Gertie Brookes, c. 1891.

shut my eyes & never speak to them, if so mind you tell me.<sup>3</sup> When Gertie received a letter from her sister Daisy, who stayed up north, she heard the gossip from home. 'I think nearly all were there except Minnie even her young man', Daisy wrote of an Arbor Day dance. 'We had a merry time of it at night we had games & dancing & kept it up till 10 then dropped.' The crowd thinned out, some among the younger set stayed behind, and 'we had a lively time of it to ourselves. I expect Minnie would be jealous if she knew we stopped till 12 then trudged home.'<sup>4</sup>

We are used to seeing the teenager as an invention of the 1950s, a time when rebellious young city-dwellers embraced the pleasures of an affluent post-war society: milkshakes, motorbikes, petting in the movie theatres and jiving to Elvis.<sup>5</sup> But the idea of the teenager did not suddenly emerge during the middle of the twentieth century. Its foundations had been laid by the time Gertie and Daisy



put pen to paper.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, there were no milkshakes or motorbikes during the 1880s, and definitely no rock 'n' roll, but Gertie, Daisy, Ella and their friends mooched about and chased young men anyway. 'I was surprised to hear about Mr Bridge, perhaps he is going love crazy about Minnie. I should not be the least surprised', Gertie wrote in one letter.<sup>7</sup>

Gertie, her sister and their friends were not teenagers in the sense we now know them, members of 'a discrete age group with its own rituals, rights and demands', but their experiences set the scene for what was to come.<sup>8</sup> The late nineteenth century was a critical period here and overseas. In New Zealand, as in Australia, North America, Britain and Western Europe, young people moved from rural areas to the growing towns.<sup>9</sup> While Gertie scrubbed floors and washed dishes for Auckland's well-to-do, some of her contemporaries sought employment in the big new factories. They forged an early kind of youth culture as they laboured at their machines and chatted in the lunch-rooms. School pupils also built age-specific worlds. The new secondary schools enrolled only a few young people at first – Gertie was not amongst them – but eventually they shaped the teenage experience of most New Zealanders.

The significance of the gap between childhood and adulthood has changed since the nineteenth century. The slow growth of a consumer culture, the emergence of new kinds of leisure, the advance of popular psychology and fresh rituals of romance, along with developments in work and schooling, cultivated fertile soil in which the concept of 'adolescence' took root and grew through the early decades of the twentieth century.

Teenagers do not usually occupy the centre of historians' attention. Most general histories of New Zealand focus on adults, and those in their teens appear as minor players. When historians do look at teenage lives, they usually scrutinise adults' condemnation of 'juvenile delinquency', alcohol, sex and boisterousness in general.<sup>10</sup> But adolescence is not simply a focus for adult anxieties. It is also a phase of life that young people experience and navigate as they make their way in the world. *Teenagers: The Rise of Youth Culture in New Zealand* tries to redress the balance. This book nods towards adult concerns but it also looks beyond scandal to explore the views of teenagers themselves. The voices of people like Gertie and Daisy Brookes bring teenage history alive. Everyday activities such as talking, playing, reading and dressing are all fodder for a cultural history like this one,



## Chapter Three Jazz Age Youth

The typewriter changed girls' lives dramatically. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, the number of office jobs exploded under the influence of this new machine with its clacking keys and smudgy black ribbon. Women began to displace men in clerical roles. In 1881 only 1 percent of office workers in the private and government sectors were women; by 1911 that figure had swollen to 24 percent.<sup>1</sup> A great many were young, typically aged between seventeen and twenty-one, and the newspapers used the term 'flapper' to define them.<sup>2</sup> The *Star* first told of the flapper in 1905, describing her as 'the latest product of the New Age: the lady typewriter'.<sup>3</sup> The *Evening Post* picked up the theme in 1914, suggesting that the flapper wore 'fashionable clothes' and 'ran about offices at the most critical time of her life'.<sup>4</sup> When she ventured outdoors she talked loudly in the streets, giggling and swearing.<sup>5</sup> On weekends she headed for the seaside to sunbathe, show off and go out surfing: she held her own 'with men in this new sport'.<sup>6</sup>

Readers of the *Grey River Argus* learned more about the flapper's social aspirations:

OPPOSITE At Days Bay, Wellington, during the 1920s.



There is one vast upheaval which as yet we are hardly aware of. It is the sudden emergence of the Flapper as a force in society. Yesterday there was no such person. To-day she is all over the place [. . .] Long before they are marriageable our girls are sure of themselves and sure of us. The Georgian maiden of 15 has more devil in her than the Victorian matron of 50. Indeed, the younger she is the more intractable and untameable she is apt to be. The rising generation are drunk with the new wine of liberty. They are born free, and they laugh when any Rip van Winkle offers them a pretty little set of chains to wear in a dainty little doll's house [. . .] The Flapper knows all there is to be known about life long before she is supposed to have commenced to live.<sup>7</sup>

If the larrikiness and the girl masher were the flappers' nineteenth-century predecessors, parading along the pavements, wearing confronting clothing and openly courting male attention, the confident and intractable flapper challenged adult perceptions even more.<sup>8</sup> Some grown-ups worried about her freedom and a loosening of sexual morals, but she intrigued others.<sup>9</sup> The *Mirror*, a fashionable magazine, published many articles referring to the 'modern girl' and her love of stylish clothing, independence and late hours.<sup>10</sup>

As a cultural phenomenon the flapper spoke to a pair of competing trends that emerged during the late nineteenth century and shaped the decades that followed.<sup>11</sup> James Belich suggests that New Zealand society tightened up 'like a giant spanner', the result of a successful 'moral crusade' by those who promoted self-restraint, temperance and probity. 'Its after effects', he adds, 'kept things tight until the 1960s.'<sup>12</sup> But this is a considerable oversimplification.<sup>13</sup> The moral crusaders were noisy and they notched up some successes, but New Zealand society also eased back during the period. This was in fact a double movement. New types of organised leisure – Bible Class, Scouts, Guides and the rest – regulated young lives while making room for a new sociability. A resurgent militarism worked to rigidify boys' experiences but continuing urbanisation enabled a bohemianism of sorts. The commercialisation of everyday life was no less complex. Advertisers reasserted ideals of domesticity at the same time as girls' work choices expanded. The cinema, a revolutionary force, showcased flapperdom, incited sexual pleasures and fanned the flames of moral anxiety. With adolescence now firmly established as a concept and a way of life, formal and informal youth cultures expanded during these radical and conservative years.

## The Body Transformed

Adolescent bodies symbolised social change during the first decades of the new century. Girls' hair went up, then down, then radically reduced in volume. Pinned-up hair signified maturity during the early 1900s. Late in 1906, Dunedin fifteen-year-old Dora de Beer wrote about her sister's transition: 'Kate put up her hair, and school has broken up.'<sup>14</sup> Four years later, an eager lad named Erle wrote from boarding school to his sister Tommy: 'I look forward to seeing you with your hair up. I will look forward to having some fun with you then.'<sup>15</sup> The first flappers bucked this trend and wore their hair down. The word 'flapper' described the way shorter, newly liberated locks dangled and swayed against their owner's neck. The baggy dresses of the early flappers also heralded change by displacing the tight-laced look of the 1890s.



Grace (*left*) and Nola, 'The Heavenly Twins at Waimarama Picnic: Flappers'. Office assistant Nola Pratt and her friend Grace lived in Hawke's Bay. Their photograph, from the early 1910s, shows the transitional style: Nola's hair is long and flowing and the girls wear loose baggy dresses. The pillarbox dress and the cloche hat came later.

## The Perils of Puberty

The physiological aspects of puberty caused annoyance and anxiety for a great many boys and girls in their teens. In 1883 Fred Gibbs threw tea dregs at his brother Dick who teased him about growing whiskers. Six years later domestic servant Gertie Brookes tried to find out about acne. 'I think I get uglier every day of my life', she wrote to her friend Ella Marsh; 'you know all those pimples I had on my face at home, well they have not all gone away yet. Mrs Baker asked a lady doctor the other week what caused them & if I could take something to make them go away & she said that nearly all young girls at my age had them.'<sup>149</sup>

Elizabeth Mason's friends were kept entirely in the dark about puberty during the 1920s. One said that 'when her pubic hair began to appear, her elder sisters



told her that they suffered from the same affliction and that it was a shameful peculiarity limited to the McGrath family and had to be kept secret. As for menstruation, that was another frightful disease which only the McGraths suffered from.'<sup>150</sup>

Menstruation was the most taboo issue of all.

It is barely mentioned in nineteenth-century sources, even in the most private of diaries.<sup>151</sup> The veil of silence continued through the thirties and

forties although a few magazines began to advertise menstrual pads and tampons. They did so with euphemistic references to freedom, comfort and fluffy cotton fillings.<sup>152</sup> Some girls knew nothing about periods and thought they were dying when they first saw blood. The mother of Wyndham lass Ailsa Dawson kept her



daughter in the dark, and Ailsa had her first period while staying with family friends in another town. One of her hosts 'was so kind and cleaned me up and made me feel better and helped me understand that it was quite normal'. Back home she did not let on until she could conceal matters no longer. Her mother 'produced a pile of sewn flannelette cloths along with a belt and safety pins' and 'matter of factly told me to pull myself together as all girls had to put up with this'. Menstruation was strictly women's business. Ailsa 'had a great fear my brothers would find out, Mum made it quite clear they were not to know'.<sup>153</sup>

Sex education was offered haphazardly during the war years. Some commentators wanted sex instruction for school pupils and young factory workers, but few such classes took place. Instead, there were pamphlets with titles like *Young Manhood, Sex, Love and Marriage* and *Digest of Hygiene for Father and Son*.<sup>154</sup> These described the bodily changes of puberty and warned of the consequent perils.<sup>155</sup> In 1941 evangelical writer Mary Manse published under the pen-name 'Purity'. She suggested that masturbators had a pale, sickly appearance and a 'shamefaced look'.<sup>156</sup> Local magazines took a different tack by publicising newer psychological ideas: one suggested masturbation was often used as an 'emotional anaesthetic' or indicated a 'repressed' homosexuality or an unconscious 'resentment against being a girl'.<sup>157</sup> One way or another, the physiological effects of puberty still worried a great many adults.



A parasol (*opposite*) and the back seat of a bus (*above*) during the 1930s.

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