

***Title: Stain removal, shopping and social responsibility: Aunt Daisy, New Zealand's first multi-media celebrity, 1933 -19603***

***Abstract:***

For over thirty years Maud Basham was a New Zealand food writer and media personality who, under the name of 'Aunt Daisy', exerted an immense and unparalleled influence over domestic behaviour, household spending and pantry stocks. So prominent was she, that she was named a 'Goodwill' ambassador for New Zealand and made several visits to the USA during and after WWII where she was described as 'The Dynamo from Down Under'. Best known in popular memory as a radio personality, Aunt Daisy wrote regular magazine columns, also fifteen cookery books and books of handy hints, which combined nonfiction and fictional components, and included tips for recycling products as well as readings, quotations and sayings which she found inspiring. By focusing on these innovative texts, this paper will look at how the voice, personality and attitudes of the 'first lady of New Zealand radio' are embodied in nonfiction prose to create texts that are still popular, in print, and on sale in the twenty-first century.

***Biographical note: Gail Pittaway:***

Gail Pittaway has had a long interest in cooking and cooking books since childhood encounters with Aunt Daisy's and the Edmonds Cookbooks and student jobs in restaurants, increased further by a short stint at the Elizabeth David owned and created shop Covent Garden Kitchen Supplies while on a working holiday in London in the 1980's. A former teacher of English, Classics and Drama in secondary schools, Gail is now at Wintec lecturing in Creative writing, Drama and Storytelling to Master's level.

The only New Zealand executive member of the AAWP, she regularly contributes papers to their and other conferences in the areas of writing and communication, having also been a member of the NZ Communication Association since 1997 and of the Tertiary Writing Network of New Zealand since 1998. More recently she has been investigating more popular genres of writing, namely food writing (looking how at the structures of food writing have given it endurance) at the TWN Future of Writing Conference at Victoria University Wellington in 2009 and the Popular Culture Association of Australia and NZ conference in Auckland, July 2011 (where she tracked the notion of the modern celebrity chef with the shaman and mage of prehistoric times).

She writes poetry and short stories as well as reviewing theatre for New Zealand newspapers and theatre websites and reviews books for National Radio NZ's *Nine to Noon* show.

***Title: Stain removal, shopping and social responsibility: Aunt Daisy, New Zealand's first multi-media celebrity, 1933 -1963***

“I was a young lad when Aunt Daisy used to come on the radio around 9am each week day. She was part of everyday life back then. She used to broadcast out of Wellington and proclaim that every day was a lovely day. It used to be very confusing for me to hear this on some stormy days knowing it was blatantly untrue. My mother would write her recipes down - along with thousands of other mums. What a different era that was.” (Trevor (Wellington Region) | 03:49PM Sunday, 17 Apr 2011) (Johns, 2009)

“My Mother would stop doing the housework every morning, Mon - Fri at 9.00am, turn up the radio and sit down with paper and pencil to write down the day's special recipe or hint from Aunt Daisy. Her voice still lives in my memory as if it were today. There were four chimes, the "Bicycle Built for Two" theme and then;

‘GOOD morning everybody, good morning, it's a lovely day!’

Each session began with a "Scrapbook Piece" and a chat about things in general. She would always find a patch of blue sky even on the stormiest of days, and that warm feeling of contentment was there for the rest of the day, just listening to that bubbling voice”. (Hagley, E. Kiwiana71)

These are just two blog accounts from baby boomers, like me, of the impact of Aunt Daisy, or Maud Basham on the lives and families of New Zealanders, particularly through her regular week day half hour radio show which ran from 1936 until 1963. However in addition to her full time work as a broadcaster, Basham wrote regular magazine columns of household and cooking tips for two decades, generated books of handy hints and recipes and also booklets of thoughts and sayings from other writers, all of which derived from the content of her radio show. While most might describe Basham as an anthologist, after all the recipe and handy hints books were largely collated out of the letters and requests that came in from her listenership and the books of thoughts from her own mostly inspirational Christian reading list, there is still much in evidence of her unique voice through these and other publications. This article will attempt to identify examples of her unique style and also explore the elements of her background and work as well as the social and historical context, which contributed to her influence over New Zealand households for more than three decades.

### **Earliest influences**

Despite being associated with avid patriotism for New Zealand, “Aunt Daisy” was actually born in England in 1879. Though christened Maud Ruby Taylor she was known as Daisy all her life. (Fry, 1957, p. 27). She received her earliest education at a London Academy for young ladies, and then immigrated with her mother and siblings to New Zealand after the death of her father (Basham B. , 2009, p. 1) (Fry, 1957, p. 36).The family arrived in the small colonial settlement of New Plymouth in 1891. According to Fry, her chief biographer, to whom she told her memoirs shortly after receiving the award of Member of the British Empire, in 1956, her first impressions of the new country were culinary.

“Our first impressions of New Zealand were wonderful’ says Aunt Daisy. ‘We thought it was marvellous to walk along grassy paths lined with ferns and geraniums. ...

‘The people were very kind, but what struck us most was the way they made tea and had it with their meals- even when there was meat! Perhaps it was because water had always to be boiled.

“And everybody was always asking you to meals- there were tables spread with scones- always scones- everybody made batches of scones every day. And there was always sponge cake- that’s the New Zealand national cake- great hunks of sponge cake with cream in the middle.” (p. 37).

Daisy Taylor attended the Central School and then won a scholarship to New Plymouth High School, and, having regularly attended church services in England, including at the newly formed Salvation Army, where she particularly enjoyed the arrangements of hymns, (Fry, 1957, p. 34), she took singing lessons, joined the St Mary’s Anglican Church Choir and began to sing solos as a contralto in local concerts. Her strong Christian faith stayed with her all her life and informed her later selection of texts to quote on her radio show as well as those she would choose to print in her year books of saying and thoughts. According to Fry, Basham “declared that if she had not become a broadcaster she would have liked to be a missionary” and he goes on to comment that “[t]here have been times when she has kept the two roles separate only in name” (p 34).

In 1897 Basham began working life as a teacher, being accepted as a pupil-teacher at the Central School where she stayed for two years, earning 20 pounds a year then spent a year at Waitara School a very small country placement. On completing her training she was given charge of another country primary school at Warea, near Opunake, about 50 kilometres south of New Plymouth (Basham B. , 2009, p. 1). While lodging at a boarding house Daisy Taylor met Frederick Basham, a civil engineer, also English-born and they were married in 1904. There followed three children, two sons and one daughter, Barbara who became her mother’s biographer and literary executor. Fred Basham’s job took the family to various small townships in the North Island of New Zealand, but;

“[T]hroughout this period, Daisy taught music, conducted choirs, organised popular entertainment groups and continued with singing engagements. She was especially acclaimed for her appearances as solo contralto in Handel’s *Messiah*” (Basham B. , 2009, p. 1).

### **A pioneer of radio**

It was singing which led to an involvement with broadcasting as Basham was invited to sing for an experimental radio station in Wellington in the early 1920’s. Gradually she built up a profile as a radio singer and from 1928 began a series of programmes on the lives of the great composers which she wrote and sang in for Auckland station 1YA. However her greatest opportunity came in 1930 when the presenter of the children’s session for that same station, Ruby Palmer, known as “Cinderella” wanted to take a two week holiday and Daisy Basham agreed to take over (Basham B. , 1991, p. 56) . As all of the broadcasters had pseudonyms such as “Aunt Pat” Big Brother Bill, Aunt Molly and Aunt Gwen, (Downs, 1976, p. 41) it was only natural for Daisy to become an Aunt as well and so “Aunt Daisy” was created.

Apart from her growing confidence in the new medium of radio the financial depression of the 1930's also created an imperative for Daisy Basham to seek increased employment when her husband was first placed on half salary and then laid off work altogether by the end of that year. The family moved to Auckland where she continued with part time work in radio as a writer, performer and presenter of musical shows and children's sessions. It was writing which finally secured her further work as she deluged the New Zealand Broadcasting Company with letters and suggestion of bright new programmes which she would write and present.

Finally...she received a letter from A.R.Harris the Broadcasting Company's General Manager [who] had been impressed...by the hundred or so letters he had received from her" (Fry, 1957, p. 76).

In the following two years she moved her family from Auckland to Wellington, again in search of more hours of work, as she had only been given one day to fill at first—the then silent Wednesday on the government run station 2YA. But after building up a very popular reputation and creating many entertaining shows she was once again laid off as the manager was instructed to “only employ men”, (Fry, 1957, p. 84). Undeterred she then approached the opposition, a private radio station called 2ZW, her first experience of commercial broadcasting, then moved back to Auckland to work with another private station, 1ZB, run by Colin Scrimgeour, “Uncle Scrim”. Scrimgeours' *Fellowship of the Friendly Road* was one of the few stations where criticism of the government's social and financial policies could, be heard under the guise of sermons, and this brought Scrimgeour into conflict. While the general Christian philosophy of this station suited her own values, Daisy Basham maintained political neutrality but continued instead to build up her public following (Basham B. , 1991, p. 56).

### **“Good morning everybody!” Commercial radio and the “First Lady”**

At the end of 1933 the *Friendly Road* transferred to the then privately owned 1ZB and Aunt Daisy was given a half-hour programme for women at 9 o'clock each weekday morning. She built up an enormous following of listeners, her fame limited only by the restricted transmission range of the station. As an indication of her growing public reputation, despite her diminutive stature (she was under 5' tall) Basham was invited by both National and Labour Party selectors to run for political office in 1935 and declined. (Basham B. , 1991, p. 56).

She retained her 9 a.m. broadcasts when 1ZB became the first outlet for the state-operated commercial radio service provided for under the Broadcasting Act 1936. From the time the station opened under its new ownership on 30 October 1936, Aunt Daisy was officially permitted to mention the names of the products she was recommending (Day, 1994, p. 239). With serials, talk shows, music and entertainment now broadcast all day it was recognised that women, at home were an audience to be taken seriously and who better to capture them than the “First Lady of Radio” herself (Beattie, 2009) who opened every show with her forceful cry of “Good morning, everybody!” (Downs, 1976) (Fry, 1957)

For half an hour she would simply talk, cheerfully reading a spirit-raising thought for the day, followed by recipes, handy hints, homespun advice, comments on a concert or play she had

seen or on a sermon she had heard; all skilfully interwoven with persuasively enthusiastic chat about the products she had agreed to promote – and which indirectly paid her salary. The words tumbled out at the incredible speed of between 175 and 202 per minute, clearly articulated and precisely spoken (Fry, 1957, p. 21).

### **The Books and articles begin**

“Aunt Daisy” acquired a reputation as authentic; it was known that she would not read out a hint or recipe unless she had tried it. However in fact, as the sole breadwinner for her family and with increasing public engagements, Basham could not possibly have attempted every recipe or hint sent in by listeners. It was Frederick Basham who tested recipes at home and delighted in experimenting with the new technology of ovens, and appliances, which his wife then promoted. He collated the letters, recipes and hints from listeners and co-edited a stream of books: “Aunt Daisy’s Cookery”, ‘Aunt Daisy’s Handy Hints’ updated annually or biannually, from 1937 (Fry, 1957, p. 93). The two also published Year Books of poems, prayers and sayings that had been chosen by Daisy Basham to broadcast and these, too, proved popular and inspiring for the public through the depression years and as the world drifted into war. At first all recipes, sayings and hints were collated alphabetically; for example, under “H”;

Hokey pokey; ... Honey recipes; ... honey to kill fermentation in; ... horse hide, curing; ... hot plate marks on furniture; ... Husband, to preserve a (Copied);

Be careful with your selection. Do not choose too young. ... Some insist on keeping them in a pickle, others are constantly getting them into hot water... (Basham M. B., 1945, pp. 49-50)

Recipes in these books show the changes in technology, ingredients and food styling, from pioneer; brawn, Cornish stew (Basham M. B., 1945); to proudly nationalised; kumara tart (Basham M. B., 1945, p. 24), Pukeko (a swamp bird) Casserole (Basham M. B., 1948, p. 89), Maori Kisses, kiwi biscuits (Basham B. E., 1968, p. 82) and a spectacular dessert based on Baked Alaska, called Ngaruahoe Snow, assembled with sponge cake, ice cream and egg white frosting, with melted chocolate dripping down to resemble the eponymous volcano with molten lava, p. 42). However Basham, who had included some exotic and international recipes from the earliest volumes such as curried oysters, (Basham M. B., 1945, p. 14) , greatly extended these tendencies after her many travels abroad, in particular favouring the American preferences for combining sweet and savoury flavours, such as in glazed ham and ‘French’ ‘toast. (Veart, 2008, p. 201),

The royalties for their first book of “Aunt Daisy’s Cookery” paid for Daisy Basham to go on a good will tour of America, in 1938 and she was to return twice more; giving public addresses, broadcasts and television interview; meeting statesmen, their wives (including Mrs Roosevelt) film stars, service men; all the while maintaining a diary, continuing to send magazine articles and transmitting broadcasts back to her New Zealand public (Downs, 1976).The series of essays that were published in the New Zealand Listener were later published as a book, “Aunt Daisy and Uncle Sam” (Basham M. , 1945) and she was called

“The Dynamo from Down Under by the American Press (Fry, 1957, p. 105). Her third volume of cookery was “advertised as *Aunt Daisy’s Book of Special Recipes* (No.3), with recipes from California,” (Veart, 2008, p. 201) such as for “real” American coffee and her subsequent cookbooks included recipes for pumpkin soup, Boston fried potatoes, Waldorf salad, Virginian Short’nin’ Bread. Her 1947 cookery book, with another edition the following year, had three different hamburger recipes as well as Chicken Maryland, chicken pie with sweet potato topping, Dixie hot frosted gingerbread and several variations on American layer cakes (Basham M. B., 1948). Her programmes and books also introduced more exotic flavours to readers and she showed particular reverence to curries and chutneys (Fry, 1957, p. 76), (Veart, 2008, p. 204).

### **The influence and legacy of Aunt Daisy**

Television was not introduced into New Zealand until 1960 and radio was the dominant daily entertainment. Alongside the growth of the broadcasting industry the technology of printing small magazines and cook books had also improved and there were many produced from the end of World War II that specialised in baking, or use of specific ingredients or technologies such as new ovens (Veart, 2008, p. 201). However Aunt Daisy retained her dominance as most trusted source of inspiration for household purchases and recipes. Using her celebrity, she generated several significant campaigns for the war effort in the 1940’s ; one calling in old, unused Yale keys and other metal items to be collected and melted down for machinery, (Basham M. , 1997, p. 76) and, more popular still, ‘the Apple Pie Competition’. In 1940 there was a glut of apples in New Zealand orchards, but insufficient workers to harvest and no ships to transport tons of fruit to the usual market of Great Britain. Basham headed a campaign to get readers and listeners to experiment with and develop apple pie recipes, the culmination of which was a pie making competition, sponsored by an electric oven manufacturer, held in the 1840-1940 Centennial Hall and naturally hosted by Aunt Daisy (Beattie, 2009). She regularly contributed articles to the Weekly News, the Women’s Weekly and also contributed a small regular column in the NZ Listener from 1939 until 1950’s, *Ask Aunt Daisy*, and it is in these, more than in the recipe and hints books, that her writing voice is evidently similar to her speaking voice; such as in this June 14 1940 article about using up stale bread.

Nowadays there are so many delicious eatables to be made from stale bread that people often take an extra loaf on purpose!

In olden times, of course, when bread was made only two or three times a week, at any rate in country places, there was generally plenty of stale bread which had to be used up somehow, because once the fresh, hot loaves came out of the oven – and h! The goodly smell therof!- nobody wanted to eat the old bread, however many times Mother said, “Waste not, want not.” .

However, there are still some places where the baker does not call every day, so here is a recipe for using up stale bread (Basham M. , 1997, p. 26) .

The recipe goes on to layer slices of buttered old bread and apples with sprinklings of nutmeg, to make a baked pudding.

These Listener food columns included: ‘The Succulent Sardine’, ‘Eat more fish’; ‘Malt in Cookery’; ‘Cakes for holidays’; ‘Fruit season begins’; ‘Enjoyable recipes for Lent’ (Waitakere Library, Auckland, NZ, 2007). Her handy hints books covered everything from making veranda blinds out of old curtains and lino out of old carpet, to a dozen recipes for stain removal – jam stains, rust stains, bath stains, ink stains, fruit stains, many of which advise dropping on water from a height, or the use of borax if all else fails. (Basham B. E., 1968, pp. 181, 189). No household would treat an unusual stain without consulting Aunt Daisy; I still do. Barbara Basham edited a book combining recipes and handy hints which has been revived through 21 reprints since 1968, and re-edited in 2009 as a cook book only, with so many of the items in the handy hints no longer available, or deemed safe. The publishers believed there was a revival of interest in thrift and home cooking (Beattie, 2009) (Johns, 2009); to date this book is still selling well (Beattie, 2009).

### **Last words**

Older by more than two decades than Julia Child and Elizabeth David whose more sophisticated influence became fashionable after the 1960’s, Daisy Basham was a breadwinner and business woman as well as doyenne of domestic detail. Her breadth of subject matter can be compared with that of Mrs Beeton, with a similar intention of instruction and support to households (Beeton, 1989). Unlike that other great lady of household fame whose life was very short, Basham was already 50 when she began full time work in radio and in her 80’s when she stopped. While her reputation is as a famous voice, the legacy of that voice in her writing, with its enthusiasm, openness and curiosity to new products and people, and passion for practical Christianity is still apparent. In 1990 she was the subject of an affectionate verse musical by New Zealand writer Peter Hawes, who introduced her to the stuffy male dominated world of early radio in this way in the first act:

At two hundred words a minute  
I will teach you how to cook  
Mock whitebait patties, tea for fatties  
Treacles, tart and chook;  
I’ll teach you how to starch your smalls  
And how to unstick drawers,  
I’ll give you hints on saving mince  
And cure for winter sores;  
And tips for making table cloths  
From smocks when you out grow ’em  
Then I’ll define all humankind  
In one short four line poem (Hawes, p. 3).

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