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

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 also wrote regular magazine columns, as well as fifteen cookery books and books of handy hints which combined non-fiction 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 non-fiction prose to create texts that are still popular, in print, and on sale.

Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway has had a long interest in cooking and cooking books since childhood, increased further by a short stint at the Elizabeth David owned and created shop, Covent Garden Kitchen Supplies, in London in the 1980s. A former secondary teacher of English, classics and drama, Gail is now a lecturer in creative writing, drama and storytelling to Masters level. The only New Zealand executive member of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, 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. Gail writes poetry and short stories as well as reviewing theatre for New Zealand newspapers and theatre websites. She also reviews books for National Radio NZ's *Nine to noon* show.

Keywords:

Writing – Food writing, New Zealand – Aunt Daisy – Maud Basham

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 (Johns 2009: 79).

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 (Otorohanga 2013).

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 weekday half hour radio show which ran from 1936 until 1963. However, in addition to her full time work as a broadcaster, Basham also 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 – as, after all, her 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 evidence of her unique voice in 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 (in terms of 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. Although christened Maud Ruby Taylor, she was known as Daisy all her life (Fry 1957: 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 2009: 1, Fry 1957: 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’ (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: 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 ‘there have been times when she has kept the two roles separate only in name’ (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 2009: 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, ‘throughout 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 2009: 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 1920s. 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 1991: 56). As all of the broadcasters had pseudonyms such as ‘Aunt Pat’, ‘Big Brother Bill’, ‘Aunt Molly’ and ‘Aunt Gwen’ (Downs 1976: 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 1930s 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: 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: 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 programs where criticism of the government's social and financial policies could be heard under the guise of sermons, and this brought the left-wing Scrimgeour into conflict with the New Zealand national government. While the general Christian philosophy of this station suited her own values, Daisy Basham maintained political neutrality, and continued instead to build up her public following (Basham 1991: 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 feet tall) Basham was invited by both National and Labour Party selectors to run for political office in 1935 and declined (Basham 1991: 56).

She retained her 9am 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: 239). With serials, talk shows, music and entertainment then 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).¹

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: 21).



Fig 1. Photo by kind permission of Alexander Turnbull Library. National Publicity Studios
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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 her listeners. It was Frederick Basham who tested recipes at home and delighted in experimenting with the new technology of ovens and innovative 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: 93). The two also published annual yearbooks 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. Under ‘H’, for example, can be found: ‘Hokey pokey ... honey recipes ... honey to kill fermentation in ... horse hide, curing ... hot plate marks on furniture ... Husband, to preserve a’. This final entry continued: ‘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 1945: 49–50).

Many of the recipes and hints in these books show the changes in technology, ingredients and food styling, from the pioneer era; brawn and Cornish stew (Basham, 1945), to proudly nationalised dishes such as kumara tart (Basham 1945: 24), Pukeko (a swamp bird) casserole (Basham 1948: 89), Maori Kisses, kiwi biscuits (Basham 1968: 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 (Basham 1945: 42). However, Basham, who had included some exotic and international recipes from the earliest volumes such as curried oysters (Basham MB 1945: 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: 201).

The royalties for their first book of *Aunt Daisy's cookery* paid for Daisy Basham to go on a goodwill tour of America in 1938 and she was to return twice more; giving public addresses, broadcasts and television interviews; meeting statesmen, their wives (including Mrs Roosevelt), film stars and 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: 105). Her third volume of cookery was 'advertised as *Aunt Daisy's book of special recipes* (No. 3), with recipes from California' (Veart 2008: 201) such as for 'real' American coffee. Her subsequent cookbooks included recipes for pumpkin soup, Boston fried potatoes, Waldorf salad, and 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 MB 1948). Her programmes and books also introduced more exotic flavours to readers and she showed particular reverence to curries and chutneys (Fry 1957: 76, Veart 2008: 204).



Fig. 2. A collection of Aunt Daisy cookery and handy hints books, September 2012. Private collection. Photo by the author.

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 cookbooks 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: 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 1940s ; one calling for old, unused Yale keys and other metal items to be collected and melted down for machinery (Basham M 1997: 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 the tonnes 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 also regularly contributed articles to the *Weekly News*, the *Women’s weekly* and also contributed a small regular column in the *New Zealand listener* from 1939 until the 1950s, *Ask Aunt Daisy*. 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 14 June 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 oh! The goodly smell thereof! – 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: 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’, and ‘Enjoyable recipes for Lent’ (Waitakere Library 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 BE 1968: 181, 189). No household would treat an unusual stain without consulting Aunt Daisy; I still wouldn’t.

In 2009, Barbara Basham edited a book combining recipes and handy hints which has been revived through 21 reprints since 1968, and re-edited as a cookbook only, with

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: 3).



Fig. 4. The Aunt Daisy window on the Kiwiana walk in Otorohanga, September 2012.
Photo by the author.

Endnote

1. Link to sound recording of Aunt Daisy's voice, at <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/sound/aunt-daisys-beetroot-chutney> (accessed 2 October 2013)

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