“Beer, Glorious Beer”: Gender Politics and Australian Popular Culture

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“Beer is a religion in Australia,” Sydney journalist and author Cyril Pearl declared in 1969. It was “more important to the media than the more conventional religions,” and “similarly enveloped in myths.” The first of these was that Australian beer “specially brewed as it is for hairy-chested he-men, is the strongest in the world.” Another myth, related to that first “patriotic belief” and similarly patriotic, was the belief “that Australians are the greatest beer-drinkers in the world.” (Pearl 1–8)

Pearl captured here the link between beer drinking, masculinity, and Australian nationalism that was at its height in the 1950s and 1960s, which has had an amazing endurance in the promotion and marketing of beer. Although economic historian Tony Dingle long ago demonstrated that Australians have always drunk more tea than beer, myths have a way of surviving cold facts. Being a nation of tea drinkers has not resounded with imagined national identity, nor have the gender dynamics of Australia’s beer-drinking culture been quite as natural as popular culture has celebrated. Gendering beer drinking as masculine is a paradox given the well-documented history of women as brewers and ale-sellers from medieval times to the present. In colonial Australia and throughout the twentieth century, a large number of women ran, managed, and often owned their own pubs, or worked for others behind the bar (Kirkby; Clare Wright). They also have been well known to enjoy their beer. In earlier times, “songs sung in alehouses and taverns celebrated the
drinking woman” because women had a place alongside men in the English alehouse culture of the early modern period (Cast). Yet in more recent times in Australia, women’s involvement in pubs as customers and servers has been invisible because drinking beer has been written as masculine.

Pubs: A Sex-Segregated Drinking Culture

By the middle of the twentieth century, Australia had a clearly defined, sexually differentiated drinking culture. When a Sydney barmaid, writing under the pseudonym of Caddie, claimed that her first pub job in 1924 was also the first time in her life that she had been in a bar, she was pointing out that “no woman who valued her reputation would have dared put her nose even into a Ladies’ Parlour” (Catherine Edmonds Wright 1). This was because Australian pub culture in the post-World War I period, when pubs in several states were forced to close at six o’clock in the evening, was infamous as “the six o’clock swill.” By the mid-1950s, it had become a tourist spectacle as men drank their daily quota of beer in the short hour between finishing work and the pub’s closure. The public bar on these occasions was not a pretty sight, and women were excluded from it except to work as barmaids (Grimes).

To some extent, Australian pubs were following the tradition of English alehouses which had, by the mid-nineteenth century, become working class alternatives to the churches with all of the same kind of trappings—stained glass windows, altar rails, communion jugs, rituals and taboos—where men imbibed their masculinity (Harrison). Australian pubs in the interwar years became primarily drinking venues whose primary purpose was to sell beer (they were often tied to a brewery). They were not American-style cocktail lounges, nor were they wine bars—at least not until after the 1960s. Although there was the occasional city cocktail bar, “a few waterfront pubs and one or two rather avant-garde ‘arty’ hotels” (McGregor 133) where men and women could drink together, most hotel bars in the 1960s, especially in suburban and rural areas, were not mixed drinking venues for a sophisticated urbane clientele; pubs were “still strictly male preserves” (McGregor) whose culture, in the words of one historian, was “linoleum counter-tops patterned with beer rings . . . cold tiles,
chrome glass, buxom genial barmaids, groups of singing bawling customers . . . football arguments . . . smoke . . . roll-neck sweaters, dirty dungarees and hacking jackets . . . voluptuously-shaped bottles . . . [and] batallions of up-ended glasses” (Freeland 2).

Consequently, pub culture and drinking customs had become the heart of what it meant to be an Ocker, defined by the Macquarie Dictionary as “an Australian male displaying qualities considered to be typically Australian, boorish, uncouth, working-class . . .” This culture was “hatched in the pubs. It was rooted in drunkenness. The jokes, the songs, the poems . . . the language [of] . . . rogue ocker insouciance . . . were born in the boozy democracy of the Six O’Clock Swill,” in the words of Playboy features writer Michael Thomas (50). Pubs were “the centre of Australian life,” the sites of “raucous bon-homie, yarn-spinning, laughter and swilling-down schooners . . .” and in more sexually charged language, “occasionally pumping drinks into the girlfriend or wife” (McGregor 134). Donald Horne pointed out, “Men stand around bars asserting their masculinity with such intensity that you half expect them to unzip their flies” (Horne, 1964 36).

Getting drunk was what Australians equated with “the good life,” Craig McGregor said. Drinking “allowed men,” he claimed, “to indulge in the mateship ritual which has been one of the persistent motifs in Australian history” (134). Nostalgia for this “adolescence until death” culture of the 1950s and 1960s, “when the pubs closed, the streets filled with wild cries and the gutters ran with chunder. . . . legless drunks . . . staggering up the street, barking at the pavement, canoning off the buildings and plate glass, crawling on their hands and knees the last few yards to their cars . . .” was created in the mythical “good life” of popular culture (Thomas 50).

So, on one hand, beer drinking was masculine because it was associated with the sex-segregated drinking spaces and culture in pubs—the men’s-only public bar where beer was consumed. In writing about Australian drinking culture in this way, authors like J. M. Freeland and Craig McGregor captured and simultaneously perpetuated an enduring Australian myth about the gendered properties of drinking beer, and the place of the public bar in Australian identity.² It was quintessentially masculine. Women’s visibility as either drinkers—what Adelaide writer Max Harris sardonically called “the Ocker sheilah” (28)—or workers in pubs was not part of the fantasy of
pub culture. Their presence had been obliterated by what was in effect a masculinist conception of national culture.

However, while this culture was celebrated, it was also a myth. As Donald Horne pointed out in 1964, "Australians have never been quite the nation of boozers they imagine themselves to be" (40). A significant proportion of the population has never carried the myths into practice, and women also drank in pubs, and had been increasingly doing so since World War II in the beer gardens, or lounges. They were excluded from the men's-only public bar, but pubs themselves were not off-limits, either as meeting places or somewhere to rest and refresh during a long day's shopping in town. Women were indeed present in the pubs as workers, owners, or licensees, and they drank beer (or shandies or lemon squash). In some establishments, they had their own space, "the Ladies' Lounge," and men were not allowed in there any more than women were allowed in the male space of the public bar. In other words, women had their own drinking culture in the pub. ³

In the 1930s, beer advertising acknowledged women's drinking culture. Advertisements were directed at women for their home consumption (Pickett). From time immemorial, beer had always been drunk in the home, where it was brewed by women and was part of the household diet. The advertisements of the 1930s for bottled beer reflected this historical continuity of women's pleasure in drinking beer, and in providing it to family members. Bottles were large, containing enough beer to be shared, and it wouldn't keep. So while men imbibed their masculinity through draught beer in the company of other men in the public and saloon bars of suburban and country pubs, beer advertising portrayed women as beer drinkers in the home.

In the 1960s, this changed. With the new technology and packaging of beer in cans, advertising began targeting young men as the masculinity of beer drinking came to be associated with beer's portability—specifically cans (or bottles, called stubbies) individually held, able to be taken in the Esky cooler to the beach and sporting events. But again, women's new freedoms of mobility, associated with the youth culture of the transistor radio and cars, was not reflected in beer advertising. As beer advertisements in the 1960s had begun targeting men rather than women, the image of women shifted to that of sexual consort, not drinking equal. The spatial arrangement of Australian pub culture and drinking customs—the consequence of past history, turn-of-the-century licensing laws, and nearly forty years
of the "six o'clock swill"—continued outside the public bar, and it was no accident.

In 1966, six o'clock closing finally ended as the last states amended their licensing laws. That year, Freeland's and McGregor's books appeared, and in the decade after, numerous other books were published celebrating Australian pubs and drinking practices. But the gendered, racialized, and class-based nature of Australian drinking culture was obfuscated in the myth-making about Australian beer. In McGregor's view, "except for a Test cricket crowd, there is no more classless place in Australia than a hotel bar." Drinking in Australia, he maintained, was "a determinedly egalitarian activity, the great social leveller" (McGregor 134). These classless, egalitarian, undifferentiated "Australians" of the 1960s whom McGregor was describing were indeed a quite specific group. They were not Aboriginal; Aboriginal people were forbidden by state laws to drink in pubs, and these laws were only beginning to be overturned in the period in which McGregor was writing. The last restriction was lifted in 1972. Even without exclusionary laws, Aboriginal people were not free to breast the bar alongside their mates in quite the way Anglo-Europeans were. And newly arrived immigrants from eastern and southern Europe were unlikely to until they adopted the status of "new Australians."

The pub's culture made clear the distinctions between those old and new Australians, in exemplifying cultural differences in the publicness of drinking rituals and in tolerating intolerance by celebrating the egalitarianism of mateship and denying the narrow boundaries that hedged in the select circle of "mates." Immigrants were expected to adopt "the Australian way of life" in order to assimilate with the rest of the population. Drinking beer was part of being Australian. But where you drank your beer depended on what kind of Australian you were, if one at all. It was only recently that the "darker seamer side" of mateship had begun to be explored. Sol Encel pointed out in his lectures on the Australian Broadcasting Commission radio in 1971 that mateship was clearly "a notion severely restricted in its coverage. It does not apply," he said, "to Aborigines, to non-European immigrants, or to women" (52). At times, the overtly racist nature of Australian nationalism emerged. "This," said Thomas, was the "unacceptable face" of Ockerdom, "the creepy paranoid streak, the sharp end of flag-waving national pride" (50).
That period of the late 1960s to early 1970s was a “time of challenge to some of the dominant values and bodies of knowledge in Australia,” according to Donald Horne (1980, 4). He went on to say, “what was changing, at least marginally, were definitions of what being ‘male’ might mean” (35). First, Australia was becoming increasingly urbanized. Australian identity was built on the legend of the Bush, but Richard White has claimed that the “Australian Way of Life” of the 1950s was “specifically urban,” “undeniably urban, or rather suburban” (162).

Second, Australia was undergoing demographic change. Under the impact of immigration from Europe and the United Kingdom, older Australian drinking practices were being assailed by expectations of more sophisticated behavior. Wine was preferred with meals, and it was no longer acceptable for women to wait outside on the footpath or in the car while Dad went in for a drink with his mates, something New South Wales Royal Commissioner Justice Maxwell described in 1954 as “a most unedifying spectacle” (New South Wales). The old culture was coming unstuck. Licensed restaurants and grocery stores were attracting customers away from hotel dining rooms and bottle shops. Couples were drinking together in pubs and clubs in greater numbers than ever before.

Pubs were sites for acting out sexual and other differences, and the social changes under way in Australia were reflected in the competition pubs now faced from new competitors for the tourist trade (motels) and entertainment. As a mark of the cultural anxiety generated by these changes, beer drinking and pub culture was being celebrated and reinscribed in popular culture as a site of exclusively masculine pleasure in Australia. Women were now asserting their right to be included in that culture.

The opposition that women encountered to these demands is a measure of the emotional investment in the sex-segregated culture of beer drinking that Cyril Pearl identified as religious. At first, protests were peaceful enough and rather low-key, but once the women’s liberation movement was under way, some demonstrations got very nasty (Mejane). In one demonstration in Melbourne, about thirty or forty young women blockaded the public bar of a North Carlton pub when their request for service was refused. They then linked arms and prevented any service from being provided to men customers. A fight developed, at least one of the women was hurt, “felled, apparently
kicked," and carried outside. The women then sat in a circle on the floor, singing women's liberation songs, until the police came and removed them bodily. They were "dragged out by their legs," the daily press reported (Sun). Twelve of the women were subsequently charged with offensive behavior.

The women's liberation press gave a more graphic account of the violence. Male customers, "deprived of their life-blood . . . became immeasurably infuriated . . . they started abusing us, assaulting us, calling us moles, pushing us, pinching breasts, knocking one girl to the floor and kicking her in the stomach, breaking a billiard cue over another girl's head." When the police arrived and "meekly" asked them to leave, the women "sang and danced and laughed." As the cops got serious, the women "bunched together and held on grimly to each other and to the bar," resisting all efforts to drag them out. "Scenes of incredible brute force followed. Women were grabbed, and thrown out by the hair, legs, breasts, neck and clothes . . . some were thrown headlong into the vans. One girl was pushed over a car bonnet and beaten around the head." Still, the women resisted, surging back into the pub, "angry and determined to reassert their rights." Only by arresting the women were the police able to disperse the demonstration ("No Room at the Inn").

Obviously, drinking beer in pubs had a powerful political symbolism. Women equated their treatment as customers with denial of their equal rights. Theirs was a major challenge to the drinking culture, although the gender dynamics were not necessarily predictable. Some Brisbane women decided to liberate a pub they heard was refusing to serve women in the public bar. There the proprietor was a woman who instructed her women employees to serve neither the women nor the men in their company. On the two occasions they visited the pub, the liberating forces found that "most of the men in the bar had no opposition to our being served, and in many cases heartily supported our demands" (Shrew). Some Sydney women similarly encountered staunch opposition from the publican and bar staff but sympathetic endorsement from many of the pub's patrons. The publican's determined resistance ("don't tell me how to run my pub") was, according to the account subsequently published, "greeted by a lusty boo from the drinkers from around the bar" (Women's Liberation Newsletter).
Pub Culture Becomes Ocker Chic

Inexplicably to men like journalists and authors Michael Thomas, Max Harris, and Donald Horne, and just as women were desegregating public drinking spaces, the popular culture of Australian masculinity that had celebrated excessive beer drinking in the 1960s found new political manifestation in the 1970s and 1980s as "Ocker Chic" emerged with the return to government of the Australian Labor Party. As historian Richard White later pointed out, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's election policy for the arts deliberately set out to foster national identity (169). In practice, this high ideal of "new nationalism"—which took pride in Australian cultural achievement and sought to protect Australia from foreign ownership and to lift Australia out of colonial cringe status—led instead to an uncritical applause for Australianness. "Everything home-grown became precious, achingly significant, invested with patriotic magic" (Thomas 50). What began as critical appraisal ended as national pride. Paul Hogan, who later played Crocodile Dundee in the movie of that name, symbolized the new nationalism: "... talking to people in their own language, ocker to ocker, ratbag to ratbag, and it was thrilling. Overnight, after years of being made to feel vaguely ashamed of themselves, Australians looked in the mirror and fell in love" (50). Ockerdom was rampant, had "spread like the Spanish flu," and "become a massive social force" (Harris 13). The consequent irony was that what originated as satire became, in White's words, "instead an affectionate tribute to the national identity," and, with Hogan's employment advertising on television, "ended up as the most effective way of selling cigarettes to children" (White 170).

It also reinscribed gender inequality despite the achievements of the Whitlam government in putting feminist demands on the political agenda. Ocker Chic was, as Max Harris pointed out, very political. It was the emergence, not of the traditional beer-drinking, working-class clientele of the public bar (who were abandoning the pub), but of middle class urban professionals—journalists, playwrights, filmmakers, advertising executives—creating their own vision of Australianness. The Ocker, Bev Roberts wrote, was "undoubtedly a projection of the larrikin fantasies of middle class Australian men" (Roberts). Advertising executive John Singleton, who "first heard the nagging didgeridoo hum in the national marrow," was the architect
of Ocker Chic, but he was joined by broadcaster and filmmaker Philip Adams, satirist Barry Humphries, and numerous others (Harris 13). Theirs was a celebration of national identity that was based on a mythological and disappearing working class. Singleton, “a big bodgie with a loud voice,” was “the archetypal little battler, with no time for bankrupt European airs and American high-rise” (13). While Thomas claimed, “There used to be a whole nation of men just like him” (50), in fact the Ocker image of Australianness had always been exclusive and Anglo-centric—and, as at least one scholar has claimed, not even unique (Spearitt and Walker). Max Harris deplored the resurgence of Ocker Chic that had “backtracked to the maleness of the 1940s.” It was “male chauvinist piggery rampant,” and attempts by women to join in “by virtue of their beer-guzzling capacities” were doomed to failure because they were resented rather than admired. He saw only further oppression for women under its mantle (30).

Ocker Chic emerged in the 1970s when the old Anglo-Australian culture was already on the wane but was at its peak in the 1980s under the Prime Ministership of Bob Hawke, when it was an even more backward-looking myth. “It’s all a dream. It’s not there anymore,” Thomas declared in 1987. Australia was multicultural, part of a global economy. Multinational corporations and international finance had taken over. By the 1980s, “there’s nobody out there in navy blue singlets any more. They’re all wearing alligator shirts and running shoes . . . sitting around . . . eating guacamole quiche and drinking low-alcohol beer” (Thomas 50). Nevertheless, while sex segregation in pub drinking practices may have disappeared, the beer advertisements in the 1980s for brands like Tooheys and Castlemaine XXXX drew heavily on Australian rural imagery and made it clear that “Men do. Women don’t” [drink beer], as they simultaneously celebrated and debunked Australian masculinity and its association with beer (Turnbull 17–18).

“The ocker is dead,” announced an article in the Bulletin in 1989. Australians in the 1990s were “a cultured, environmentally-conscious, integrated people who go to the opera and the football, want the luxury of five-star hotels when they travel on business, want to go bush on their holidays, want quality rather than cheap products, and are conservative rather than wasteful.” In 1988, Australians were the biggest consumers of opera per head in the world. A “thoughtful
Australian [was] coming out of the old ocker”; a new culturally aware, gentle, creative people, “turning to more intellectual pursuits.” Thirty years of immigration, education, travel, and communications technology meant “bright, curious people ready to take on the world” (Williams).

Nevertheless, in the 1990s, beer advertising sustained the religious trinity of masculinity, nationalism, and beer. This advertising was “so retrogressive almost hysterically so in the light of contemporary issues about gender . . . and representation,” media critic Sue Turnbull pointed out in 1993. Advertisers like John Singleton, she said, “seem strangely out of step with what is going on in Australian society, and doggedly nostalgic . . .” (Turnbull 17–18). Advertising is, of course, directed at a particular market for its product, but even so, the “regressive macho imagery, clearly lacking irony or self-mockery” was more symptomatic of masculine anxiety, leading the advertisers “to overstate the case and assert an impossible and untenable maleness.” Even the Foster’s advertisements, which depicted a range of masculine types—ethnically and occupationally diverse, urban, and ordinary—still presented “a world dominated by men and it’s their events, non-events and talk in the foreground of the beer-drinking backdrop in which most women figure as benign presences.” The advertisers seem determined to “avoid what everyone knows, beer drinking transcends sex, class and culture.” They seemed unable to represent beer drinking in anything other than nationalistic terms, a nationalism that was simultaneously sex-specific and often rural and gormless. As Turnbull so succinctly concluded, “Television [advertising] teaches us that what you drink, when and with whom is no innocent affair” (18).

It never has been as women, non-English speaking immigrants, and Aboriginal people have always known in what W. E. H. Stanner called “this ’sunburned, muscular continent’” (White 161). Despite women’s long-standing and obviously growing patronage of pubs, their enjoyment of beer, and even a rising rate of alcoholism among women, women and beer-drinking have not been popularized as part of Australianness (Summers 82–84). “Australian women exist in a language environment that does not reflect their particular experiences” Bev Roberts wrote in 1984 (16). Since the 1960s, in contrast to the 1930s, women have been inexplicably absent from beer advertising, and their place in representations of pub culture has been narrowly restricted. Australian popular culture—its language and activities—is mostly derived from male spheres of activity.
“Unfortunately Ockerism is not confined to the symbolic or fantasy level,” Roberts pointed out. In limiting women’s experiences, it reinforces attitudes and relationships that are inimical to equality (16). Consequences are not insignificant. The “sharp flag-waving end of national pride” that meant beer drinking and the sociability of the pub was an exclusive all-male preserve “might seem unimportant to the uninitiated,” as one Sydney woman expressed it, but to the “frenetic feminist,” being refused service on account of one’s sex was “a barb in the delicate buttock” (Melane).

Beer drinking has long been a pleasurable communal activity, but despite the enormous social and economic reorientation of post-1960s Australian society (that has, in fact, led to a declining beer consumption), the nostalgic association between Australian nationalism, masculinity, and drinking beer is a religious trinity that has proved hard to break.

NOTES

1. Australian Ocker slang for vomit.
2. See also Barbara, Usher, and Barnes.
4. See "British migrants want night drinking."

Works Cited


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