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Learning to drink: The social history of an idea

The idea that you could teach people to drink sensibly has been around for decades. In the United States, this notion was of particular interest after the end of Prohibition in 1933,¹ prompted by the challenge of encouraging moderation after years of binge drinking, criminal gangs selling illicit grog, adulterated drinks and speakeasies.² One who rose to the challenge was American etiquette aficionado Alma Whitaker (1933: 2), who endeavoured to communicate to post-Prohibition drinkers what older, more experienced countries knew about the ‘precious creed’ of moderation. In her aptly titled book *Bacchus behave! The lost art of polite drinking*, she stressed the need to appreciate the sacred rituals of etiquette to experience the benefits of wines and spirits as social lubricants. In this way, we could *learn* to drink and, ‘properly fortified with instructive information, we may yet learn to carry our liquor like gentlemen. It’s deucedly messy when we don’t’ (2). Whitaker declared that the ‘right quantity imbibed under the right conditions affords a pleasant stimulation’, while people who became drunk revealed all their nastier

1 Prohibition (1920–33) was a political failure, but was positive in other ways. There is good evidence that there was less drinking and abuse than before World War I; the cirrhosis mortality rate dropped sharply then plateaued, as did the alcoholism mortality rate. There was a differential affect across social classes and across regions: while the law was flouted in the north and east (and in New Orleans), the working-class people of the south and west were largely dry (Cook 2007: 26).

2 Speakeasy: an illicit drinking venue of the Prohibition years.

inhibitions (4–5).³ She believed that women had a civilising influence on men and that they would be an important influence in post-Prohibition America. Above all, Whitaker argued that it was deplorable to drink enough to become beyond one's self. To avoid any such loss of composure, her first simple rule of behaviour was never to get drunk. Intoxication has remained morally reprehensible, or at least questionable, in most public discourse throughout the modern period (Room 2005: 149). However, rather than banishing alcohol altogether, societies have held out hope that neophyte drinkers, as well as established drinkers with bad habits, could learn or re-learn 'civilised' moderate drinking. In the 1970s, behavioural research suggested that this would indeed be possible. Many of these ideas permeated Australian governments' thinking about the potential solutions to problem drinking among Indigenous people.

Taming undisciplined consumption

In the tradition of books of manners through the ages, Whitaker (1933) not only advised on personal comportment, but also provided advice on being a good guest, serving the right sort of food and drink for particular occasions and which customs should be frowned upon. By the time she was writing, the cultures of the West had come to despise a lack of self-control and to attribute success and respectability—indeed morality itself—to the power of a disciplined will (Room 1985: 135). However, the qualities of self-constraint and control over one's conduct were not innate: they had to be conditioned in people and *produced* through the internalisation of socially constructed rules of politeness and good manners. Norbert Elias (1982) described how this conditioning—the 'civilising process', as he called it—required the pacification of the individual and the absorption into social norms of notions of bodily propriety, cleanliness and order, so that people came to believe that these represented the features of a good and proper life (Frykman & Löfgren 1987). These notions had their origins in post-medieval European courtly society, during a transformative period that served as a bridge between the Middle Ages and modernity, as observed by Elias (1982) in his analysis of books on manners and the concept of *civilitéé*.⁴ During this period, manners among the elite were softened to

3 I am grateful to Robin Room for alerting me to Alma Whitaker's book and to the work of Morris Chafetz and others.

4 *Civilitéé*: civility, politeness, courtesy.

distinguish them from the coarse manners of peasants. At the same time, outward manifestations of bodily propriety came to be seen as expressions of the inner, whole person. These ‘civilised’ ways of comporting oneself were elaborated further among the elite in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Eventually, these behaviours became transformed into the dominant, mainstream culture of modern European society. In fact, they became the norms of Western middle-class culture: second nature. Elias (1978) saw civilisation both as a process and a concept. As a concept, it was a self-conscious construct by the ‘West’ in which European society came to believe itself to be superior to earlier societies, as well as to contemporary but more ‘primitive’ ones (3–4). In their analysis of the making of the middle-class world view of nineteenth-century Swedes, Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren (1987) went further, suggesting that barbarism was eliminated by using health as ammunition in the civilising process: a civilised person had to be convinced that if he or she transgressed or failed to internalise social norms, then he or she would actually come to physical harm (255). In this way, ‘civilised’ people who worried about their physical as well as their spiritual health had to watch themselves; they had to be clean, wholesome, of good conduct and exert self-discipline. By contrast, ‘uncivilised’, unconstrained, rowdy comportment (such as uproarious drinking among peasants) demonstrated a heedlessness of the consequences.

In pre-industrial England, daily drinking was the means by which social relations were both generated and reinforced. Among the labouring classes, there was a mutual obligation to treat others with drinks, as it was through this giving and exchanging of drinks that people established and remade the social ties of obligation and reciprocity. For English villagers, these symbolic values were more important than the possibility of a drunken accident or a bad hangover; not to drink was virtually unheard of, as it would represent a complete withdrawal from socially meaningful existence (Adler 1991: 381, Schivelbusch 1993).⁵ These descriptions of the symbolic meanings attached to alcohol in English village society prior to 1830 bear remarkable similarity to the meaning of drinking among many Aboriginal people in Australia today. For Aboriginal people, as for eighteenth-century English villagers, the integrity of social relations rest on claims to rights and the fulfilment of mutual obligations that are

⁵ The same was true of colonial Sydney, according to an account by F Fowler in 1859, in which ‘not to drink is considered a crime. *Aut bibat, aut abeat*—which means, in Australia, if you will not “stand” you may walk’ (Birch & Macmillan 1962: 156–7).

often prior to other considerations. With the advent of modern industrial society in Europe, there was additional reason to subdue the excesses of the labouring classes, often expressed through unrestrained drinking at carnivals and festivals as well as shared daily drinking. Rural labouring work, such as haymaking and sheep shearing, had been punctuated by four or five meal breaks a day accompanied by pints of strong beer, but this could not occur in a factory, for the timing, location and style of this kind of drinking threatened the orderly development of industrial production. A new industrial workforce had to learn the disciplines of punctuality, routine and perseverance (Adler 1991). It became necessary to quarantine drinking, confining it to acceptable physical and temporal limits, and to create a separate sphere for leisure time. By the late eighteenth century, the eight-hour day was widely adopted in industries in Britain and Australia (Melbourne, in particular, was a focus of eight-hour day activism) and this helped indirectly to create the notion of recreational time and, with it, a burgeoning of alternatives and counterattractions to drinking for members of the public: sport, outdoor activities, dancing and museums.

Modern societies expect that adults will respect the divide between work and leisure: adults are expected to be soberly attentive and conscientious when in charge of small children, when driving, using machinery and at work (Room 2011). Of great assistance in this project was the temperance movement that arose in England and America (and Australia) in the nineteenth century. By preaching discipline, sobriety and self-control, the temperance movement's urgings dovetailed well with the needs of an emergent industrial economy. Indeed, by discouraging workers from spending their wages at the tavern, and by encouraging a middle-class home life and promoting thrift, temperance became a vehicle for the transmission of a middle-class domestic ideology (Adler 1991, Kociumbas 1995, Burnett 1999). Ideas of temperance and moderation helped to create a domestic market for consumer goods; there would, after all, be more cash and leisure time available to devote to buying things. The temperance movement itself was class conscious: wine, for example, (considered a civilised drink consumed by the educated classes) was not often singled out for condemnation, whereas 'spirituous liquors' (preferred by the lower orders) were. Reflecting this inclination, the temperance movement initially called for moderation, thus allowing for the consumption of wine rather than complete abstinence. It was only later in the nineteenth century that temperance advocates rejected social drinking altogether and promoted abstinence from all alcoholic beverages.

For employers, controlling their workers' alcohol consumption and giving support to temperance activities were ways in which they could improve productivity and ensure a healthy industrial labour force. This explains why, in late nineteenth-century England, several villages and 'garden cities' were built by industrialists for their workers. It also explains why these complexes not only provided appropriate accommodation for the workers, but were often designed to be alcohol-free towns, equipped with dry 'temperance' hotels (Howard 1902). The socially reformist businessmen and philanthropists of the time genuinely wanted to improve the living conditions and quality of life of their workers, but they also wanted to secure and protect their labour force from the evils of drink.⁶ For example, chocolate maker John Cadbury (2010) was a Quaker and a supporter of the temperance movement who eventually became a total abstainer. To house his chocolate-factory workers, he built the 'model' village of Bournville near Birmingham in the 1890s. As a result of his influence, Bournville remained free from pubs and off-licence sales until recently, although it did have two licensed working men's clubs.⁷ In Cheshire, William Lever created a planned village ('Port Sunlight') to accommodate workers at the nearby Lever Brothers Sunlight soap factory. The social reformer Joseph Rowntree, who was a member of another chocolate and confectionary-making family, believed that temperance would improve the lot of the working classes. He later became a supporter of the Swedish Gothenburg system of municipal or community control over alcohol sales as a means of diminishing drunkenness. Like these philanthropic capitalists in Britain, the teetotaler Chaffey brothers in Australia tried to protect their workforce by making their 'irrigation colony' on the border between Victoria and South Australia alcohol free. When this became unworkable because of sly grog sales, Gothenburg-style community-owned hotels were deemed the lesser of two evils and several were opened in South Australia. The idea that a more controlled hotel environment would trammel citizens' excess drinking, thereby helping them to learn to drink in a more civilised manner, flourished. This 'lesser of two evils' thinking also influenced the repeal of prohibition for Indigenous Australians, provoking experiments

6 In Austria, supporters of workers' temperance, including 'socialist teetotalers' such as Viktor Adler, were, in effect, trying to 'impose a bourgeois-puritanical model on the working class' largely for political rather than health reasons (Schivelbusch 1993: 166).

7 In September 2015, in a controversial decision, a local shopkeeper was granted the first licence for 120 years to sell takeaway alcohol in Bournville (Finnigan 2015).

in social learning in the form of beer rations in canteens and fostering hopes for controls over sales by having Indigenous people themselves take on ownership of licensed hotels.

The 'civilising' toast

In the earliest days of the colony of New South Wales, only the most cursory attempt was made to mould or curtail the drinking behaviour of Aboriginal people. Indeed, it appears that some early colonists and visitors freely offered alcoholic beverages to Aboriginal people, as they would have to other colonists, probably assuming that Aboriginal people did not need to 'learn' about alcohol. Peter Mancall (1995) suggested that this was the case in North America too: when English explorers encountered Algonquian leaders, they greeted them with wine, meat and bread (43).⁸

Within a few days of arriving at Botany Bay in January 1788, a British second lieutenant on board the First Fleet offered a glass of wine to two spear-bearing Aboriginal men they met on the shore. Philip Gidley King (1980: 34–5) of HMS *Sirius* wrote in his private journal:

Governor Phillip then went up another branch & I followed the one we were in, & soon perceived that the natives were following us, we soon came to the head of this inlet where we perceived the same party of Indians, wading over, we rowed up to them & many of them came up to the boat, we made them a few more presents, but found it necessary [sic] to put a stop to our generosity as they were increasing fast in numbers & having only a boats crew with me I was apprehensive that they might find means to surprise us as every one of them were armed with lances, & short bludgeons—I gave two of them a glass of Wine which they had no sooner tasted than they spit it out, and we asked them the name of a number of articles.⁹

8 Of course, there are numerous historical accounts from Australia and elsewhere of alcohol being forced upon Indigenous people in an uncharitable and prurient manner to deliberately provoke inebriation and spectacle.

9 For an Aboriginal oral history version of this story, see Brady (2008) and Bertie (1924).

King's tone in this description was entirely matter-of-fact: he was simply trying to make contact. He offered wine: they spat it out; he asked for some vocabulary.¹⁰ Similarly, accounts of the first meetings between Tasmanian Aboriginal people and the men of Nicolas Baudin's two ships, the *Geographe* and the *Naturaliste*, suggest that alcohol was offered without ill-intent. The Frenchmen, Baudin (1974: 318) wrote, frequently embraced the 'naturels' and on numerous occasions offered them food and drink (bread, fish, brandy and arrack from Mauritius). They also danced together and the Frenchmen performed tricks, sang and played instruments.¹¹

These early Europeans who offered wine or spirits may not have fully realised that the people they encountered in Australia or North America and elsewhere did not have any comparably strong alcoholic drinks of their own. While we now know that Aboriginal people in some regions did make mildly alcoholic fermented drinks, they had no strong alcoholic drinks (e.g. as strong as wine) prior to contact with outsiders (Brady 2008). It is likely that early visitors assumed that some form of liquor did in fact exist, if only because they had experienced such drinks in other locations in the region. Mariners, such as James Cook and Dumont d'Urville, had been offered (and had consumed) the narcotic drink kava, used widely in Melanesia and Polynesia, and may have thought that the native Australians had something similar. In the Malay Archipelago to Australia's north, on the island of Savu and at ports such as Kupang and Batavia, Europeans had drunk locally made palm wine, mild toddies and strong spirits, such as aniseed-flavoured arrack, and they also would have observed local people chewing betel nut and smoking opium.

As the colonisation project proceeded at Port Jackson, there were instances in which Europeans offered alcohol to Aboriginal people as a test of their level of civilisation and as a 'civilising' gesture—an active experiment across cultures in the teaching of manners surrounding food and drink. Alcoholic beverages, particularly wine, were understood to be

10 It seems a little surprising to us now that an exploratory party about to land on an alien and potentially threatening shore would even have wine on board, but this was apparently common, especially when water was unpredictable and scarce. In May 1788, George Worgan (1978: 45), also of the *Sirius*, described taking a 'delightful excursion' up the harbour in which his party partook of cold kangaroo pie, plum pudding and a bottle of wine.

11 However, the Tasmanians (and, indeed, Aboriginal people in other parts of Australia) frequently rejected the food and drink offered to them by Europeans; even food that was recognisable to them, such as fish, was treated with suspicion (Plomley 1983). Europeans were disconcerted and puzzled by such refusals.

a natural feature of such an endeavour. From medieval times in Europe, the conditioning of polite behaviours was just one aspect of the overall civilising process designed to improve the peasants and the lower orders, as Elias's (1978, 1982) work demonstrates. In the eighteenth century, it was considered desirable to avoid public displays of passionate anger, hot temper and drunkenness, and women were to be treated with respect and decorum (Gascoigne 2002: 149, Salmond 2003: 393).¹² People had to learn the rules of behaviour expected at the table: for example, how one should sit (with a goblet and a well-cleaned knife on the right, the bread on the left) and how one should lift food to the mouth by means of a fork, rather than fingers (it was considered 'uncivilised' to put food into one's mouth with fingers, even from one's own plate—a rule that had little to do with the danger of illness and more to do with being seen in society with dirty fingers) (Elias 1978: 126). An important part of the spread of courtly manners to the broader populace in the early eighteenth century was drinking to the health of guests:

It is civil and decent for a prince to drink first to the health of those he is entertaining, and then to offer them the same glass or goblet usually filled with the same wine ... nor is it a lack of politeness in them to drink from the same glass, but a mark of candour and friendship. (93)

These manners and rules of comportment communicated distinction, refinement and social civility. It seems to have been relatively common for sea captains, such as Arthur Phillip and James Cook, to selectively invite certain 'natives' or chiefs to dine with them on board their vessels or onshore.¹³ In Tonga, a chief joined Cook for a dinner of fish and a glass of wine (Salmond 2003: 217). In Tahiti in 1773, Cook invited local chiefs Tu and To'ofa to take dinner on board his ship. Tu, who had already learned European manners, showed To'ofa how to use a knife and fork, and how to salt his meat and drink wine from a glass (248). Similarly, at Sydney Cove, Governor Phillip invited Aboriginal 'chiefs' to dine with him at his house: Arabanoo was first in December 1788; a year later, Bennelong

12 Despite an overall lack of rights for women in Europe, the status of women was considered an indicator of social development; it is significant, then, that diarists of colonial Australia frequently referred to the downtrodden position of Indigenous women (Gascoigne 2002: 149).

13 Although James Cook was brought up as a Quaker, he evidently had no qualms about offering strong alcoholic drinks to the indigenous people he encountered on his travels, including children. In 1773, he gave three glasses of wine to a sulking 14-year-old Maori boy, making him very drunk (Salmond 2003: 187).

and Colbee were invited.¹⁴ By then, the distinction between savagery and civilisation had become entrenched in the thinking of European colonists. In inviting Bennelong and Colbee to dine with them, the English hoped that their ‘dinner-table diplomacy’ would serve as a civilising influence, facilitating peaceful dealings with the ‘natives’ (McIntyre 2008: 39.6).

It seems likely that there were mixed motives behind some of these invitations—especially considering that the Aboriginal ‘guests’ had been taken into the settlement by force. The invitations were intended to facilitate good relations and to demonstrate the superior customs of English society; however, they were also designed to test the alacrity with which Aboriginal people could learn such manners and habits and thus, ultimately, be amenable to assimilation and civilisation. When Aboriginal guests observed and mimicked English manners, it pleased their hosts. Arabanoo, for example, reportedly used his cup and saucer ‘well’ when taking tea with the governor (Hunter 1968: 132). King was surprised and pleased that Bennelong was so polite, imitating all the actions and gestures of every person in the governor’s family, ‘bowing, drinking healths, returning thanks, etc. with the most scrupulous attention’; this was considered remarkable, especially given the ‘state of nature he has been brought up in’ (Hunter 1968: 405). The English dressed him in trousers and a red woollen cloth jacket. An initiated Wanghal man, Bennelong (Woollewarre) not only accepted Phillip’s hospitality, he also formed a relationship with the Englishman, sometimes calling him Been-en-aa (‘father’), perhaps in an attempt to find a place for Phillip and his officers in the traditional kinship system (Smith 2001). As Isobel McBryde (2000) has pointed out, Governor Phillip and Bennelong needed each other to gain advantage and to ensure the survival of their respective groups, and they manoeuvred around each other to achieve this (254).

Introducing the ritual of raising glasses of wine to drink toasts to health was a key feature of such interchanges and was often mentioned by diarists. Toasting reached a peak of popularity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and drinking to the health of the King of England was the most common toast of the time. In Tahiti, for the observation of the Transit of Venus in 1769, Cook and Banks, celebrating the King’s

14 On many occasions in the early colony, Aboriginal people refused to consume the food and drink offered to them. Arabanoo initially only drank water and refused bread and salt-meat; later he became an ‘avid’ drinker of tea. Bennelong’s wife, Barangaroo, refused to taste wine (Tench 1996: 96, Hunter 1968, cf. Baudin 1974: 305).

birthday, invited Tupaia, the Polynesian navigator, and others, on board. Tupaia drank all the toasts to 'Kihiaro' (King George) and became enormously drunk (Salmond 2003: 80, cf. MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969: 43).¹⁵ Another Tahitian, Mai, taken back to London on the *Adventure* in 1774, showed his prowess with English customs by learning to ice skate and play chess; he also drank to the health of 'King George!' whenever toasts were proposed (Salmond 2003: 297). At Sydney Cove, wine was offered at Phillip's dinners, but only Bennelong accepted the drink and learned to raise his glass and drink to the King—a process that he called '*daging*'. George Barrington, in his 'impartial and circumstantial narrative' of life at Botany Bay, reported that Bennelong:

Having observed, when at the governor's house, his majesty's health drank in the first glass after dinner, and had been taught to repeat the word before he drank his own glass, he imagined the liquor was called the king; and when he afterwards came to know that it was wine, yet he would frequently call it king. (Rickard 2001: 92)

Bennelong later realised that wine itself was not really called *daging*, but he continued to make a joke of his mistake and to refer to wine in that way, knowing it would provoke a response (Smith 2001, McIntyre 2008).¹⁶ Bennelong was described at the time by diarists such as Watkin Tench and King as someone who drank socially and who held his liquor well; it was later that he either became or was labelled a 'heavy drinker' (Collins 1971, Kenny 1973, Smith 2001: 44).¹⁷ It is ironic that Bennelong was later stereotyped as the first Aboriginal drunk (*Sydney Gazette* 1813, Kenny 1973): he should be remembered for the much more significant reason of being the first Aboriginal individual to have been taught Europe's most important drinking ritual: the toast (Schivelbusch 1993: 169). Not only is it the oldest European drinking custom (dating to at least the sixth century), bearing magical and cultic associations, but it also communicated aspects of 'civilising' behaviour.¹⁸ Toasting acknowledged

15 Although, on this occasion, Tupaia and the other Tahitians did accept wine and become intoxicated, it appears they disliked the experience and their distaste for alcohol lasted several years (MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969).

16 In time, the term '*daging*' (meaning alcohol) was taken up by Aboriginal people across a wide area of New South Wales (Troy 1994: 48).

17 As it turned out, the civilising 'project' around Bennelong was a failure from the British point of view. In David Collins's (1971, vol II: 134) last reference to Bennelong, he reported that by 1798 Bennelong preferred the 'rude and dangerous' society of his own countrymen instead of living 'peaceably and pleasantly' at the governor's residence.

18 For cultural variations in drinking customs and toasting styles, see Douglas (1987). See also Schivelbusch (1993).

and celebrated the sovereign as well as old and new lands and the countries of foreign guests—it remembered absent friends and it honoured, linked and integrated those present. A toast could seal a mutual pact and acknowledge mutual dependence. As Julie McIntyre (2012) points out, while Bennelong must have absorbed the power of meaning contained in the triumphal tone of the toasts, he would not have realised that, by toasting the King, the colonists were also toasting empire and thus the inexorable dispossession of the Indigenous people (42).

Toasting punctuated meals and, because it was (and is) associated with the consumption of food, served to moderate, somewhat, the amount of alcohol consumed; however, it was certainly not always thus. In the early days of the colony of New South Wales, toasting was not inevitably associated with restraint. Every prisoner and all officers and private soldiers at Sydney Cove received a special ration with which to drink toasts to the King's birthday in June 1788, as well as numerous other public toasts. On that occasion, Worgan (1978: 53), a surgeon on the First Fleet, reported that 'Port, Lisbon, Madeira, Teneriff and good old English Porter' went 'merrily round in bumpers'.¹⁹ Fifty years after Bennelong's experience, John Sweatman (1977), a diarist and clerk on HMS *Bramble*, noted that the toasts at formal dinners could be endless. He described one Sydney dinner of 80 people and five kinds of champagne at which an alderman sitting near him became 'very cunnubified' and had to be led away (65). While this kind of determined toasting slowly declined in popularity as the decades passed, diarists and other observers still thought it worth a mention (and clearly found it amusing) on the occasions when they came across an Aboriginal person being taught to toast, or going through the motions of a toast. Tom Petrie (1904), in his reminiscences of life in rural Queensland in the 1840s, described a settler inviting an Aboriginal man called Billy to come and have a glass of grog with him:

Now Billy, hold the glass so, and say 'Here's good health, gentlemen'. The squatters all stood round, and Billy, who could not say 'health' took the glass, and this was his toast 'Gentlemen, here you go to hell!' Of course, this caused roars of laughter. (276)

19 Bumper: a wine glass or other vessel filled to the brim.

In the western district of Victoria, an Aboriginal man, Corwhorong, who was known as Wilmot Abraham, appeared on drunkenness charges more than anyone else in the Warrnambool district. On one occasion, he used his supposedly patriotic toasting as a means of outwitting the magistrate:

Wilmot informed the bench with an indignant air that it had been the Queen's birthday, and as a loyal person he had been drinking toasts to her health. The presiding magistrate could not withstand his confession of loyalty ... Wilmot escaped with a caution. (Critchett 1998: 41)

In New Zealand, the Maori elite adopted the etiquette of European toasting with great sophistication. Marten Hutt (1999) proposed that the appropriation by Maori of European drinking customs, such as toasting leaders, showed that alcohol was being linked to political allegiances and alliances. At a Maori hui in the 1860s, each chief took turns to propose a toast. As he proposed a toast to the Queen, one asked that she should send 'plenty of powder, plenty of rum, and may both be strong! And may she send and open a public house here' (27).

McIntyre (2008) has argued that teaching Bennelong and his small group of companions to drink wine during dinner in the first years of the colony was part of a considered strategy to persuade Aboriginal people to abandon 'savagery' and to test the potential for them to become 'civilised':

In terms of the practical scope of the project of 'civilising' the Aborigines by exposing them to 'civilised' British culture, it is significant that only the Aborigines who had particular acquaintance with the Governor and other officials took part in dining rituals at which wine was served. These Indigenous Australians were shaped as an elite, reflecting exclusiveness of the white elite. In assembling this intimate company Phillip and his men developed affection for the Aborigines they knew, but did not attempt to draw any others into the close circle of British authority in the colony. (39.10)

Wine itself was a marker of wealth and political power in late eighteenth-century England, consumed as a traditional part of social gatherings for celebration, bereavement or companionship (39.3). Above all, wine (as opposed to spirits) was considered a civilising drink. In an eighteenth-century form of drug substitution, wine was thought of as an antidote to the consumption of much stronger liquors that were the bane of the colony. Colonists believed that even the cultivation of wine grapes (and the practice of horticulture in general) would promote civility. Indeed, even the Australian countryside itself, encumbered with the 'dreary eucalyptus',

could be beautified and tamed by vineyards. In this idealised vision, the bush would eventually give way to the civilising industry of winegrowing that could employ many thousands of workers; the lower classes would be led away from drinking spirituous liquors through viticulture and wine consumption; and, once good quality light wines were freely available, people would surely begin to drink like the peoples of the Mediterranean (McIntyre 2011: 199). Colonists would then be ‘merry instead of mad’ and ‘animated instead of boisterous’ (Dingle 1980: 242). As long ago as 1776, Adam Smith, in his Enlightenment text *The Wealth of Nations*, extolled the so-called Mediterranean drinking style, perhaps making him the earliest in a long line of commentators to do so (McIntyre 2011).²⁰ Smith promulgated the idea that wine had the power to bring about sobriety in itself, declaring that the people of wine countries such as Spain and Italy were the soberest people in Europe. Possibly because he was an economist rather than a sociologist, he attributed the apparent sobriety of Spaniards and Italians to financial rather than social reasons. He believed that the cheapness and easy availability of wine in those countries was responsible for their relatively moderate consumption patterns, rather than the fact that alcohol (in the form of wine) was an accompaniment to food and consumed sociably.

Learning by observation

Far from this idyllic bucolic fantasy of what might have been going on in parts of the Mediterranean, the settlers and convicts of New South Wales drank themselves literally to oblivion in several cases documented by the Lieutenant Governor of the colony, David Collins. In his journals, Collins noted that the superintendent of convicts drank half a gallon of Cape Brandy and died; that a marine died of an inflammatory complaint brought on by heavy drinking; that two women and a child drowned after the women had been drinking; a drummer’s wife expired in a fit of intoxication; and that two young men had a drinking competition

20 The deregulation of liquor laws in Australian cities in recent years to allow for more small bars (e.g. in Sydney) has often been idealised and promoted as reproducing a ‘Mediterranean lifestyle’ and a concomitant (supposedly) trouble-free style of drinking. However, the idyllic archetype relates to a few cultures on one side of the Mediterranean, and even these do not escape the casualties of liver cirrhosis (Douglas 1987: 5, Room & Mäkelä 2000: 481, Blocker et al. 2003: 583). In the United Kingdom, a critic of new 24-hour licensing laws that aspired to mimic a European drinking culture, described them as a fantasy based on ‘too many Tuscan holidays’: longer hours would not mean more sensible drinking, just more drinking (Measham 2006: 259).

with raw spirits and one died on the spot (Collins 1971). From 1793, all convicts working for officers were paid partly in rum and by 1796 illicit distillation was widely practised.²¹ By the 1820s, the drinking habits of the inhabitants of New South Wales had:

Assumed certain distinctive characteristics. They were heavy spirit drinkers. Their average of around four gallons per head was four times greater than that of their countrymen in Britain ... some colonists drank [wine] regularly and in significantly larger quantities than the British per capita average of a third of a gallon between 1800 and 1830. Beer however was only consumed in relatively small quantities. (Dingle 1980: 241)

The problem was not only how much people drank, but *how* they drank. By the 1820s, the Rocks district of Sydney had a population of 1,200, one-quarter of which was Irish. Just as it had been in the pre-industrial setting of rural Britain, drinking was communal and collective, and it was very public; brawling and gambling were considered normal behaviours and disputes were settled in public, often in angry and violent confrontations (Karskens 1999: 56). Men from the ships binged on two months wages in two nights ashore at pubs like the Whaler's Arms, named for its clientele; the same pattern was repeated by pastoral workers from the inland.²² The Austrian naturalist and traveller, Baron Charles von Hugel (1994: 43)), made a number of acerbic comments about Sydney, its criminal population and the drinking habits of the English, when he visited there in 1833:

The only thing standing between the English and their rapid progress towards world domination is the fascination alcoholic beverages hold for them ... A bottle of brandy or a bottle of claret compensate an Englishman for the absence of all other joys of life ... But, among the lower orders, brandy [*branntwein*—spirits or brandy] is the supreme and ultimate object in life.

Servants, the Irish and the lower orders in general were said to be particularly prone to a lack of restraint. According to Mrs Charles Meredith of Sydney, one could not leave wine or strong liquor of any kind accessible to one's servants, as they would often be trundled home drunk on a handbarrow

21 Distillation became legal in the colony in 1821.

22 In 1958, Jeremy Beckett wrote that the recurrent bouts of wild drinking among Aboriginal men in outback New South Wales recalled the 'benders' of white itinerant labourers: 'It is hard not to believe that the aborigines have modelled themselves on their white brethren' (232).

or 'shouldered like a sack of potatoes' (Meredith 1973: 163, Cunningham 1966: 280). There were undoubtedly less extreme drinkers among the colonists too, but those with more restraint were drinking in private.

As they increasingly ventured into the settlement and came into contact with convicts and settlers, there were plenty of opportunities for Aboriginal people to witness the antics of people who became intoxicated in public. To begin with, supplies of alcohol and food had been precious and expensive and it is unlikely that much of either was freely given to Aboriginal people in or near Sydney Cove. In 1798, Collins observed that Aboriginal people were extremely robust, which he attributed to their 'good habit of body' and the fact that they were free from the use of spirituous liquors and the 'luxuries of the table' (Collins 1971, vol II: 134).²³ However, supplies improved and English, French, Russian and other visiting mariners were soon bartering alcohol for artefacts,²⁴ which meant that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were mingling. The 'woods' around the settlement were increasingly populated by runaway convicts and vagabonds, and Collins (1971, vol I: 405) noted that several native teenage boys were living among the settlers in different districts. The 1830s marked the heaviest spirits-drinking period in Australian history. By then, Aboriginal people were washing out empty rum casks and drinking the mixture of rum and water, which they called 'bull'; they were also drinking openly from bottles in the streets of Sydney. Scenes of staggering, ragged Aboriginal people were common enough to be depicted by artists of the day such as John Carmichael and Augustus Earle.²⁵ In the years after the early experiments of teaching Bennelong and his cohort the social ritual of the toast, Aboriginal people were left to themselves to interpret the meaning of alcohol, and what happens after imbibing it. They 'learned' by looking around at the motley collection of Europeans and were often puzzled by what they saw.

23 With the *Endeavour* at Cooktown in July 1770, Joseph Banks (1963, vol II: 130) commented similarly that the Aboriginal people they met were 'happy', being unlike Europeans for whom strong liquors and tobacco had degenerated from luxuries into 'necessaries'.

24 In an early case of sly grog selling (in contravention of Governor Macquarie's regulation against supplying natives with alcohol), one Russian navigator negotiated for 'rarities' (three spears, a shield and clubs) with two bottles of rum, 'which showed their passion for drinking. As they would not otherwise have agreed to the barter described, I was obliged to satisfy their desire' (Barratt 1981: 25).

25 Earle's lithograph, *Natives of N.S. Wales as seen in the streets of Sydney* (1830), depicts a partly clothed family group drinking 'bull' outside, apparently excluded from a licensed hotel frequented by Europeans. One woman holds a fish she has caught and another has decorated her hair with clay or gumnuts in the traditional manner; the child is pot-bellied and malnourished (National Library of Australia).

Aboriginal people's exposure to the drinking behaviour of the English came to be seen fatalistically, as an unstoppable process: a mix of passive contamination and active modelling. The first German visitor to South Australia in the 1830s, Dr Hermann Koeler (2006: 76–7), lamented the inevitability of this process, seeing Aboriginal 'alcoholism' developing through a kind of social osmosis:

Only a few blacks who had been employed as rowers or for other kinds of assistance by the whalers in Encounter Bay, had already become accustomed to drinking, and in time the South Australians will presumably also become friends of spirits just like the Aborigines of New South Wales and on the whole almost all savages who come into constant contact with the English. For no civilized nation is more devoted to alcoholism than 'Albion's proud children', and since the Ethiopian race, to which the South Australians belong ... normally only imitate and adopt the vices which they perceive in their white neighbours, even without speaking of other contributing factors, alcoholism will soon begin to effect the physical decline of the Adelaide tribe.

In a similar vein, the *Australian Temperance Magazine* published the opinion that:

Savages, as the New Hollanders for instance, resist it [alcohol] at first, and only learn its pernicious influence by obeying the imitative principle and partaking of it out of compliment to the European. Indeed, it may be doubted whether the earliest tasters of spirit were pleased with its penetrating odour, its pungent effect upon the palate, and the burning sensation it communicates to the throat and stomach: habit, and habit alone, can make it a pleasant beverage.²⁶

The influence of observation, habit and 'custom' on drinking behaviour was repeatedly stressed in early temperance tracts, which showed a surprising awareness of the power of the social environment on everyone, not just Indigenous people. 'From long habit and the power of association, the price of many men in New South Wales is a glass of rum', observed the *Australian Temperance Magazine*, which also noted that it was 'custom—daily custom—[that] brought the two powerful feelings of covetousness and appetite to bear upon grog'.²⁷

26 *Australian Temperance Magazine* 1837, I(2):17.

27 *Australian Temperance Magazine* 1838, II(2):19.

The practice of observing and imitating white men is described in an oral history account from far north Queensland that reveals how mystified Aboriginal people were by the drinking of whites. The story, translated from the Kuuk Thaayorre language, also described the introduction of alcohol in Cape York:

Long ago we didn't know the taste of it but saw the whites drinking. None of us here went near it to actually swallow alcoholic drinks though others elsewhere did but we still kept our distance. When we saw stray men drinking here and there and commented 'Oh yes, those men there, what are they gulping? Is it food? I'll first go and have a look to see what they are swallowing!'

'Whacko, there it is, finished!' One man was roaming around and the whiteman said, 'come on chaps, there's plenty more of this liquor!' ... We were quite oblivious of alcoholic drinks. I was telling you about the whiteman's drinking that he passed on to us. So he kept on drinking and still went back for more! (Foote and Hall 1995: 2)

Learning by observation is still cited by Aboriginal people as the means by which they were (and are) introduced to drinking; however, more recent accounts, such as those below, describe the powers of example and persuasion presented not by Europeans, but by other Aboriginal men. A woman from Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land described the visual effect of family members who were able to drink at a mining canteen:

One thing that I noticed at that time was they'd come home and they'd be drunk, but I remember them being really happy drunk. They used to make jokes, make us laugh ... we'd say 'hey, so and so is drunk, quick', and then us kids would all run up to this man and he'd joke and do a lot of funny things that would make us laugh and we thought having *naniŋj*²⁸ to be funny, to make other people laugh, you know to be a good thing for them, we thought, at that time. But of course as the years went by they wanted more and more ... Seeing my brothers drinking ... follow their footsteps, like watching movies getting ideas ... ideas from family and relatives ... I seen them and I start following. (Wearne 2001: 47–8)

28 This is the term used for alcohol among Yolngu; it is a loan word from the Makassar language.

Pitjantjatjara-speaking men in South Australia made similar comments:

I came from college there and, hey, 'that's how they drinking!' I was watching you know. I was sitting down, you know, just watching them. Men (they passed away now) they told me 'hey, you want to get warm? Try this!' *Uwa*, yes, it was really cold too and I bin try 'em you know. First [time] I got really drunk. Yes, I couldn't walk. I gotta crawl to the camp. I was really headache then. Boss of me then. I was drinking, drinking, drinking. (Young Mr May, in Brady 1995: 130)

When you watch, you follow, you know? When somebody do things, see them and you follow their example. They drink—well, you drink too! You get in there with them, they share you, 'hey, come on, come on here, drink, here!' And you drink. That's it. The grog get hold of you. And you drink, drink, drink. (Keith Peters, in Brady 1995: 137)

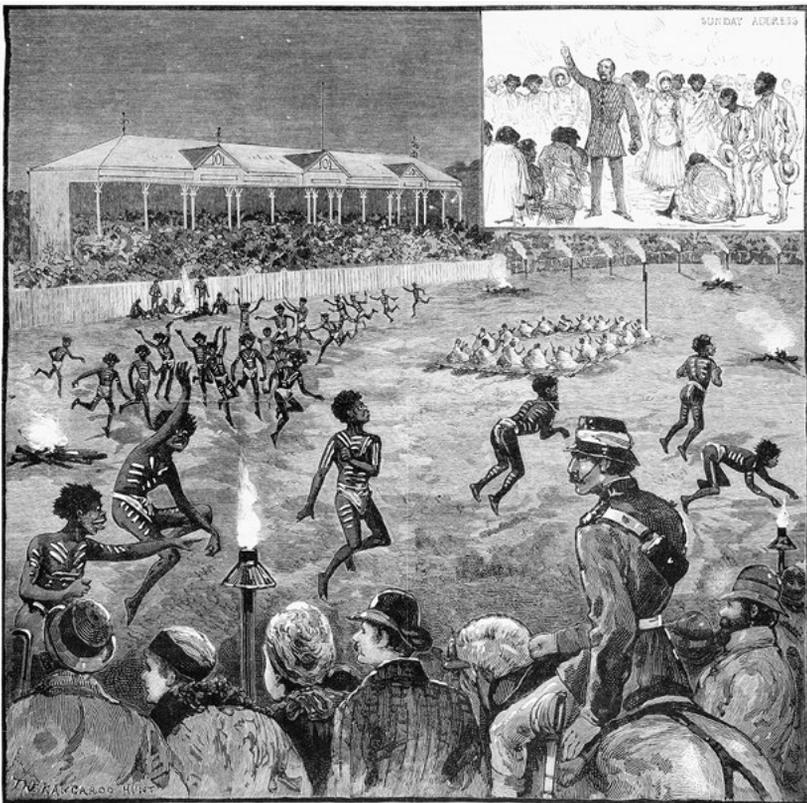


Fig. 1 Aboriginal Corroboree at Adelaide, 1885

Source: Reproduced in *Australasian Sketcher* 29 June 1885, SLV Mp009675

Performing drunkenness

In the very early days of the colony, George Worgan (1978: 18) observed that Aboriginal people were ‘expert at the art of Mimickry, both in their Actions and in repeating many of our Phrases ... the Sailors teach them to swear’. Russian expeditioners in Sydney observed Aboriginal people quarrelling and wife-beating and noted that ‘from the convicts they have acquired the expletives, curses, and oaths of the English rabble’ (Barratt 1981: 38). We can conclude from such firsthand accounts that Aboriginal people were keen observers of the behaviour of colonists and settlers—and that they took a great interest in the drunken comportment of these people. They learned the bodily and verbal manifestations of intoxication so well that not only did they know how they were supposed to act when drunk, but they were also able to accurately mimic and re-enact faux intoxication even when they were sober.

The visiting Quaker, temperance campaigner and social reformer, James Backhouse, also observed the ‘force of example’ set by European drinking and the imitative behaviour that followed. Backhouse (1843) described seeing Aboriginal people soaking empty sugar-bags²⁹ in buckets of water, avidly drinking the sugary infusion and then, in an apt illustration of drunken comportment as learned behaviour, enacting pseudo-intoxication:

The Blacks of Sydney reel after drinking the infusion of sugar-bags, and put on the appearance of intoxication so well, that it has generally been supposed, that the liquor really made them drunk. The following circumstances satisfied an acquaintance of ours, that this appearance of intoxication was feigned, and our own observation has confirmed this view. (327)

Backhouse went on to describe an Aboriginal man who, after drinking salty water (with no alcohol content) and having been told it was rum, began to throw his arms about and adopt a staggering gait, declaring that he was ‘murry [very] drunk like a gentleman’ (327). It is difficult to tell from such descriptions whether the Aboriginal men in question were mocking white men or trying to emulate them. In these instances of pseudo-intoxication, it was clearly more important to appear intoxicated than to actually be drunk. We can only guess at the reasons for this:

29 Bags of fine sacking were used to store sugar and the term ‘sugar-bag’ later became incorporated into Aboriginal English to describe honey, especially honey from the native bee (JM Arthur 1996: 61).

to cause amusement; to earn tips; to advertise the fact that the person is drunk and not responsible for his actions. Drunkenness is usually feigned to take advantage of the excuses that such behaviour can provide, but in these examples, the motive is not so clear. This is because the pretence was taking place at a cultural boundary, as Room (2001) has explained:

In the context of interaction between people from very different cultures. At such boundaries, the expectations and attributions about drunken behaviour take on an added dimension: each side in the interaction has expectations, whether well-founded or not, about drunken comportment in the alien culture. Further, each side builds up some knowledge of what is expected of them by the other. (196)

Mac Marshall (1981) discussed anthropological field studies of pseudo-intoxication and the ability of people to turn their drunken behaviour on and off in the context of the (supposedly) inevitably disinhibiting effects of ethanol on human beings. If drinkers can demonstrate a full range of culturally appropriate drunken behaviours ('murry drunk like a gentleman') whether drunk or not, then 'sober up' at a moment's notice, he suggests that the disinhibiting effects are called into question.

Aboriginal people's mimicry of drunken comportment found its way into formal performance contexts in dance-music events that were publicly staged to settler audiences. In Adelaide in the mid-nineteenth century, such events evolved into a tradition of regular 'corroborees', as they were called, conducted for tourists in public spaces, such as parks and ovals, and drinking seems to have been a common theme (Parsons 1997). A newspaper story noted that the Aboriginal men of Gawler Town (north of Adelaide):

Have introduced English dialogue into their corroborees, and the following short one is a great favourite—A native, who staggering drunk, comes into the ring, and addressing himself to another who is supposed to re-present a licensed retailer, says, 'Give me a pint of beer', to which the other replies, 'I shan't—you're drunk already'. A third black then says, with all the intonation of authority, 'Send for policeman' when chorus of voices gives exultingly, and with great vociferation, a sententious 'put him in jail' and, finally, young and old join in applauding the performance.³⁰

30 *Moreton Bay Courier* 16 January 1847: 4.

In 1860, the citizens of Angaston in the Barossa Valley found a group of Aboriginal people from the Murray River encamped outside the town. The local newspaper noted approvingly that they were ‘well clad and well behaved’, and that they performed corroborees that included demonstrations of drills and marching. Another part of the performance included the ‘imitation (minus the liquor) of a *whitefellows’ drinking party*’ (emphasis added), in which performers asked each other:

‘What will you take?’ and ‘what will you take?’ etc. ‘I’ll take a glass’ and ‘I’ll take a nobbler’,³¹ concluding all with ‘hip, hip, hoorah!’³²

Later in the nineteenth century, Aboriginal men from the Coorong and the Murray River performed corroborees on the Adelaide Oval. Some of these events were controversial, described by disapproving white observers as being a circus or a sham, inauthentic because of the cross-cultural elements incorporated into the action. One article described such performances derisively as a ‘whitey-black corroboree’, because of the ‘utilisation of appliances of civilisation in the display’.³³ Nevertheless, in May 1885, 20,000 Adelaide citizens turned up to watch a dramatic night-time corroboree lit by coloured lights, flaming torches and fireworks, in which semi-naked Aboriginal performers walked onto the oval singing God Save the Queen. After a kangaroo dance, they performed ‘a little satire on civilization’ that involved ‘liquoring up’ and a pantomime on intoxication—falling down, yelling and tumbling about (see Fig. 1). One account interpreted the performance as:

Affecting to teach the whites the evils of intemperance ... there can be little doubt that the second part of the program had both moral significance and a certain amount of irony. Evidently most of the Aborigines performing it belonged to a Blue Ribbon organisation and, having become abstainers, wanted to illustrate the principles they had adopted. (Whimpress, no date: 5)

Drunkenness was performed at temperance meetings as well, usually in the form of cautionary dramas on the evils of drink as a way of promoting sobriety. At the Point McLeay Mission (now Raukkan) in South Australia

31 Nobbler: a small drink of beer, spirits or wine; a term first recorded in 1852 (Baker 1978: 228).

32 *South Australian Register* (Adelaide, SA) 26 October 1860: 3.

33 *Australasian Sketcher* 29 June 1885, 13(194): 99. Apart from performances at the Adelaide Oval, there were other public corroborees in Adelaide at this time, including one at the Kensington Oval (*The Observer* 6 June 1885: 30). I am grateful to Tom Gara for drawing my attention to these accounts.

in 1888,³⁴ Aboriginal members of a temperance group performed a number of recitations, dialogues and action scenes representing the evils resulting from the use of intoxicants for the benefit of visiting members of the Aborigines' Friends' Association (1888: 16).

In 1924, Torres Strait Islander dancers were filmed re-enacting drunkenness. Frank Hurley's film, *Pearls and Savages*, featured them wearing traditional *dhari* headdresses and grass skirts with trousers and rolling around feigning drunkenness while holding cups and bottles. Hurley's inter-title read: 'Dancers with bottles mimic the movement of drunk men'.³⁵ Anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1993) documented a 'modern' ceremony while they were doing fieldwork among the Yaraldi in South Australia in the 1940s. Their informant related how tempers flared easily when people were drinking, and how men simulated drunkenness in the ceremony by stumbling and waving empty bottles and singing songs about quarrels, tempers and how being 'silly' with drink caused them to 'bring out stumbling words' (219).

The content of these public, private or ceremonial performances of intoxication (involving stumbling, falling, waving arms and bottles, quarrelling and fighting) reveal that Aboriginal people not only learned and took on the Europeans' ways of being drunk themselves, but also absorbed European beliefs about what alcohol does to people: that alcohol loosens the inhibitions that constrain and excuse bad behaviour; that it contributes to male bonding and allows for disinhibited sexuality and so on. Aboriginal observers could see that, when drunk, people usually became loud, abusive and feisty, vomited, walked unsteadily, sang and passed out.³⁶ In a volume of detailed anthropological studies of drinking in Papua New Guinea, Marshall and colleagues (1982) showed how these beliefs and behaviours were taken on, largely unchanged, by Papua New Guineans, becoming merged with their local cultural perceptions of intoxication (cf. MacAndrew & Edgerton 1969).

34 The missionary at Point McLeay, George Taplin, was a strict teetotaler. There were regular temperance meetings and Aboriginal people were persuaded to 'sign the pledge'.

35 *Pearls and Savages* (New York, 1924). The introduction to this film sequence shows Mer Island, where it was presumably filmed (National Film and Sound Archive ID 6810-0012).

36 Burbank (1994: 63) described how children in East Arnhem Land (in the late 1980s) associated 'drunk' with aggression while play-acting at drinking 'beer' from an empty lemonade bottle.

Although the Irish and English were the most persistent models for drinking and drunken comportment in Australia, they were not the earliest. In the north of the country, the first drinkers of strong liquors observed by the Yolngu and other coastal peoples were maritime visitors from Southeast Asia. These men (the ‘Macassans’) were *bêche-de-mer* fishermen who sailed from Makassar, south Sulawesi, to northern Australian coasts between around 1720 and 1907. They arrived each year in December, usually beaching and setting up camp at the same locations where they processed their catches onshore, and staying for around four months until the monsoon winds turned around. These lengthy and regular stays required the negotiation of friendly relationships with local Aboriginal traditional owners. Along with other desirable items traded or presented to local people (such as cloth, rice, steel axes and tobacco), the Macassans brought a favoured and portable alcoholic drink: the distilled spirit *arrack*.³⁷ Among most Aboriginal groups in contact with the Macassans, *arrack* came to be known by the borrowed term ‘*nganitji*’ (from the Macassan ‘*anisi*’, meaning ‘strong drink’), and the term is still in use in Arnhem Land today to describe alcohol in general. We know very little about the social contexts within which *nganitji* was consumed: exactly how much was imported; with whom, exactly, it was shared; what kind of behaviours the visitors might have exhibited; and whether these Southeast Asians consciously ‘inducted’ Aboriginal people into its use.³⁸ However, given that a ‘drunken Macassan’ dance is still regularly performed in northeast Arnhem Land in the *nganitji* sequence of an ancestral song cycle, we do have some indication of its affect (Evans 1992, Brady 2008). In the dance, Aboriginal performers stagger around with empty soft drink bottles, miming the drinking of *arrack*—much as their counterparts had done on the Adelaide Oval in 1885.

In Australia, as settlement advanced, Aboriginal people soon began to confront contradictory information about how Europeans themselves interpreted alcohol. While most drank heartily, binged frequently (often until unconscious) and offered or forced strong spirits upon Aboriginal

37 At home, the Macassans also consumed other fermented drinks, such as toddies and palm wine (*sagueir*); however, these did not travel as well as distilled spirits. Wallace (1989: 224) observed that although the Macassans were ‘nominal Mohammedans’ they were lax in their religious observances and consumed alcoholic drinks with gusto.

38 Oral histories of the Macassans provide conflicting accounts of their drinking behaviour as well as that of their Aboriginal hosts. Consequently, the historical reality is difficult to distinguish from the now heavily mythologised depictions of these Southeast Asian visitors (Warner 1957, Macknight 1976, Searcy [1909] 1984, Hercus & Sutton 1986, Wallace 1989, Brady 2008: 12–14).

people for amusement or enticement, others—the missionaries of the many Christian denominations, the temperance campaigners, and many ordinary 'upright' citizens—abstained, portrayed drinking alcohol as a sin and attempted to protect Aboriginal people from its worst excesses. As a result, there were numerous mixed messages about alcohol circulating in colonial Australia.

The fantasy of (re)learning how to drink

The historical examples discussed here have demonstrated that, in the early decades of colonisation, Aboriginal people adopted many of the drinking practices of the British, Irish and others, as well as taking on European beliefs about alcohol. Aboriginal people, in a sense, did 'learn' (as neophyte drinkers) from outsiders. However, the only example of a formal induction into one aspect of the practice of drinking alcohol was when Governor Phillip taught Bennelong to raise his glass of wine in a toast in the earliest days of the colony.

Once the period of 'dinner-table diplomacy' with Bennelong and his cohort came to an end, the colonial administration (and those that followed) seemed to abandon any rudimentary notion they might once have had of easing the Indigenous inhabitants into a sociable familiarity with alcohol, and instead resorted to legislation prohibiting its sale or supply to them. For most of the nineteenth and some of the twentieth century, Aboriginal people were banned from drinking in hotels³⁹—the traditional focus of Australian drinking. Consequently, they were prevented from mixing with, and adapting to, what would later become an eclectic range of drinkers in relatively controlled licensed environments. They were also prevented from experiencing the changes in drinking behaviour that developed over time. Due to this race-based prohibition policy in Australia (and indeed in other British colonies), Indigenous people missed the opportunity for a long-term familiarisation process: they were denied the opportunity to experience the waves of change in patterns of consumption and attitudes to alcohol that affected the general population over the decades.

39 Only Aboriginal people with exemption certificates issued for 'good behaviour' could drink in hotels. In rural New South Wales, Beckett (1958) found that many Aboriginal people who would be eligible for exemption did not bother to apply. They drank fortified wine, rum and methylated spirits and consumed them rapidly: 'Once bought, the bottle is never safe until it is emptied, so ... behind a fence, perhaps, or under some hedge, it is gulped down as quickly as possible' (225).

There have been many rises and falls in consumption. The law was effective in keeping people out of hotels, but it did not prevent them from obtaining and drinking alcohol surreptitiously. After conducting anthropological fieldwork in inland New South Wales in the 1950s—a period of mostly illicit consumption of alcohol by Aboriginal people—Jeremy Beckett (1958), commenting on the widespread drinking and drunkenness among Aboriginal men, argued that:

It is not enough to regard this sort of behaviour as merely a social aberration or a symptom of spiritual emptiness [sic]; among aboriginal men it has become institutionalised; it is a central value in their lives, to which they will adhere in the teeth of strong pressure. (223)

It is both ironic and unfortunate that, by the time Aboriginal prohibition began to be repealed in Australia (i.e. mainly during the 1960s), the influence of the temperance movement was on the wane and consumption in the general Australian population was reaching levels at least as high as those of the gold rush era of the 1850s. The six o'clock swill was one of the vestiges of the temperance movement that had kept closing time to the early evening. Per capita consumption increased by 20 per cent between 1969 and 1975, which was a dramatic shift in drinking practices (Drew 1977: 80). Sales of sweet wine—the drink favoured by Aboriginal drinkers—grew by 40 per cent between 1970 and 1981 and alcohol availability generally increased (Room 1988: 418). In another unhappy coincidence, the era in which Indigenous people were finally able to drink legally also marked the beginning of the decline of the hotel as the prime focus for Australians' drinking. Rather than hotels—places where sociable drinking and some basic rules of comportment could be fostered—this period was characterised by the growth of the bottle shop and the drive-in liquor store, and the increasing popularity of cheaper packaged alcohol that made it easier for drinking to take place in unregulated spaces.⁴⁰ The liberalisation of liquor laws in the 1960s meant that bottle shops could now sell single bottles of alcohol for consumption off premises, whereas previously bottle shops had had 'gallon licences' in which the minimum takeaway purchase was 12 large bottles. This marked the real beginning of takeaway alcohol sales. Hard on the heels of changes to bottle shop licences, the alcohol industry introduced innovations such as the beer can

40 Another influence on Australian drinking patterns and the decline of the hotel was the advent of random breath testing that commenced in Victoria in 1976 but was not fully operational in all states and territories until the early 1980s. The liberalisation of liquor laws in the 1960s extended opening hours, including Sunday trading for hotels, bowling and golf clubs.

(in 1962), the ring-pull can and, later, rip-top stubbies of beer, which increased sales of this bottle size by 90 per cent (Welborn 1987). In the 1970s, Australia invented the wine cask, a silver wine bladder encased in a cardboard box. Since the wine did not go off, casks became the stock item of the takeaway trade for home or outdoor consumption (Stockwell & Crosbie 2001). For reasons of cheapness and convenience, takeaway cask wine became the drink of choice for Aboriginal drinkers (see Fig. 21).

In the few decades during which Indigenous people were able to, and chose to, drink on licensed premises—that is, the brief period from the end of restrictions until the proliferation of takeaway alcohol—progressive thinkers of the time viewed hotels as settings that facilitated a form of social learning and social contact between the races. The psychologist Norelle Lickiss (1971), whose work is largely forgotten, believed that the public drinking house served a number of functions for Aboriginal people. She nominated its value as a social centre: a communication centre (for people who were often mobile); a place for tension discharge and stress release; and as an agency for integration 'with non-Aborigines in similar socio-economic circumstances' (214). Hotels provided the setting within which Aboriginal people could moderate their consumption of alcohol, 'enjoying the social benefits of drinking without trying to get drunk', according to rural medical practitioner Max Kamien (1975: 295, Lickiss 1971). In the 1950s, before the laws were changed, Aboriginal men protested that if they were allowed into hotels they would drink beer at the normal rate, as whites did. Beckett (1958) thought there was some force to this argument, particularly if those in question were anxious to conform to 'white drinking conventions' (226). However, he found that older, more hardened, drinkers preferred wine and rum, and he heard that when a couple of hotels had briefly opened their doors to Aboriginal people, their drunken and disorderly behaviour had become 'quite intolerable'.

Drinking off premises, relatively unencumbered and unrestrained, is now so entrenched in many regions that drinking on premises in licensed venues is atypical. In 2007, when restrictions were placed on the licence of the Crossing Inn in the largely Aboriginal town of Fitzroy Crossing (Western Australia), drinkers were no longer able to buy full-strength takeaway alcohol from their hotel, and instead were compelled to purchase full-strength drinks for on-premises consumption only. The manager reported that many of his Aboriginal customers had never drunk in bars before and did not know that they were not allowed to become intoxicated in

licensed premises. They had no idea of bar rules and became aggressive when refused further service (Henderson-Yates et al. 2008, appendix VIII: 109).

Behavioural studies of drinking

The idea that people could be ‘taught’ to drink moderately reached its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s. In the post–World War II period, alcohol researchers and psychologists in the United States and the United Kingdom developed a critique of the disease concept of alcoholism that opened the way for a new conceptualisation of drinking problems as being fundamentally behavioural in nature: that drinking to excess was a disorder of behaviour over which control could be exercised (Cook 2007: 37, McCambridge 2011: 567). Once this new science of drinking problems took hold, it made way for a host of different approaches and treatments to be trialled, including social-learning models, brief interventions and controlled drinking. Researchers began to try to understand and inculcate varieties of self-control over alcohol consumption: perhaps people with damaging drinking habits could be (re)taught how to drink after all?

An influential research program in the United States produced dozens of research papers examining different cultural styles of drinking (e.g. Jewish, Italian, Irish, Mormon and Protestant). By examining ‘positive’ examples of drinking styles (e.g. Jewish and Italian) as well as ‘negative’ ones (e.g. Irish and Mormon) the purpose of these studies, as directed by the Yale Center of Alcohol Studies, was to design ways to train Protestant Americans to drink more sensibly. This tradition of research was continued by Dr Morris Chafetz who, in 1970, became the influential first director of the United States National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Chafetz believed that beverage alcohol should be presented as a normal part of life—the Mediterranean approach—rather than as an alluringly illicit substance, and that this would encourage responsible drinking. In 1971, in a submission to Congress, he observed that in societies with a low incidence of alcoholism, the beverage was sipped slowly, consumed with food and taken in the company of others in relaxing and comfortable circumstances. In these cultures, intoxication was abhorred (Chafetz & Demone 1962, Room 1976, Room & Mäkelä 2000).⁴¹ In an attempt

41 The idea that a society’s drinking norms explains, at least in part, its rates of drinking problems is now widely accepted; however, at the time, the adoption of this position was a rare example of the influence of sociological thought on public policy, as Room (1976: 1048) pointed out.

to both mimic and inculcate this integration of drinking into everyday life, Chafetz proposed that schools should teach children how to drink responsibly by providing them with heavily diluted sherry. Believing that alcohol was here to stay, he argued that people must learn to develop a healthy attitude towards it.⁴²

In keeping with the hypothesis that even problem drinkers could be taught better habits of drinking, and with clinical psychologists exerting a growing influence on alcoholism treatment research, studies turned to ways of teaching controlled drinking to people who were alcoholics, including those who had been hospitalised. Reports that some diagnosed alcoholics could return successfully to a limited drinking pattern threatened the prevailing dictum that abstinence was the only treatment for such individuals. These findings, which also challenged the disease hypothesis, were vigorously debated, primarily because the 'disease' of alcoholism was thought to be characterised by a loss of control, while the emergent research was showing that, under some circumstances, alcoholics were able to exert control (Thom 1999, Cook 2007, McCambridge 2011). English psychologist Jim Orford recalled angry reactions to his suggestion in the late 1960s that alcoholic drinking was a learned behaviour and that people could perhaps learn to drink less harmfully (Thom 1999: 144).

In the 1960s and 1970s, aversion therapy, including electrical aversion (electric shock administration) and chemical aversion (the use of nausea-inducing drugs), was used within the armamentarium of behavioural approaches to alcoholism (Mills et al. 1971). Less confronting behavioural studies looked at gulping and sipping behaviour and typical intake, and experimented with training in self-regulation, social modelling, supervised drinking and teaching and practising how to drink (Collins & Marlatt 1981, Strickler et al. 1976, 1981). Other studies compared different approaches to drinking, including direct instruction in how to drink moderately, practising target behaviours and requiring subjects to observe a model. Using insights from social-learning theory, these were often referred to as 'learning approaches' to alcohol abuse. While much of the research into learning approaches was based in the United States or United Kingdom, similar studies were undertaken in Australia (Thom 1999: 144). It is intriguing to ponder the extent to which the behavioural research studies prompted by Chafetz and his colleagues in the United

42 As an indication of Chafetz's influence, his obituary noted that he changed the view of alcoholism in the United States (*New York Times* 21 October 2011).

States filtered through to influence Australia's 'post-prohibition' era in general, and the post-prohibition era for Indigenous Australians in particular. In 1969, for example, a Sydney-based doctoral student began a project to see whether he could train drinkers to discriminate their own blood alcohol concentrations—that is, to teach people to monitor their own levels of intoxication. He later wrote what was described as a 'watershed' study into trials of controlled drinking (Caddy & Lovibond 1976, cf. McLean 1987, Thom 1999: 145). A British clinical psychologist who later moved to Sydney to become director of Australia's National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, Nick Heather, was a leading figure in the controlled drinking debate in this country. He argued that problem drinking is better regarded as a learned behavioural disorder than a disease (Heather & Robertson 1989). The behavioural social-learning studies and interventions conducted within and beyond Australia were relevant to helping people diagnosed as dependent on alcohol. They were not necessarily relevant to the task of teaching responsible alcohol consumption to those who had little or no previous exposure to alcohol. Nonetheless, such studies permeated the Aboriginal policy environment and influenced approaches to improving the lives of Aboriginal people.

Unlike the United States, which had a nationwide constitutional ban on alcohol from 1920 to 1933 that prompted individuals such as Alma Whitaker to advocate the importance of learning to drink, Australia never had total prohibition for all its citizens. Only a few regions of Australia, such as the Chaffey brothers' irrigation colony near Renmark, voted under local option laws to be dry. With prohibitions on the consumption and possession of alcohol, the discrete reserves and mission settlements where many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived were all 'dry' for most of the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries. Recognising the new era of civil rights, and aware that the prohibition era for Aboriginal people was really over, in 1963, Aboriginal activist Kath Walker told the prime minister that Aboriginal people were going to have to 'learn to live with alcohol, the white man's poison' (Bandler 1989: 98). Over the next 10 years, the idea that Aboriginal people should learn to drink responsibly began to take off, as government agencies and their proxies, the missions, started to put the idea into practice. Governments and mission authorities were agreed that once prohibition laws in the states and the Northern Territory were repealed, some protection against the potentially disastrous consequences of the sudden and unrestricted availability of alcohol was going to be necessary for Aboriginal people. The solution appeared to

be a graduated approach to availability, combined with some form of instruction or education in 'learning to drink'—ideas that led to many experiments in several remote missions and settlements in which alcohol was made available. Initially, these trials took the form of beer rations being distributed a few times a week, often under the control of an Aboriginal council; some ration systems developed into canteens or clubs with a degree of Aboriginal governance (see Chapter 3). However, other than making alcohol available in small amounts through beer rations or canteens, there were no attempts to implement the social-learning techniques tried elsewhere, such as direct instruction, supervised drinking and learning to self-monitor. Further, at the time of repeal,⁴³ it seems that there were few, if any, health education programs for Indigenous people focused on the strength, contents and risks of alcohol.

Sociologist of alcohol Robin Room urged caution about optimistic plans for engineering change in drinking habits, and not just in minority or indigenous populations. While moving towards a 'continental' or 'Mediterranean' culture of sociable drinking has long been a dream for English-speaking societies with bingeing problems, such as Australia and Britain, this fantasy has run up against the 'stubborn realities' of cultures that attach value to intoxication.⁴⁴ Cultural norms and the interactions of everyday life possess their own dynamics and can generate pressures towards heavy drinking and determined drunkenness (Room & Mäkelä 2000: 476, Measham 2006, Ormerod & Wiltshire 2009). The societies and subcultures in which heavy drinking is normative value this style of drinking positively, ensuring 'that learning to drink heavily will be transmitted from generation to generation' (Kunitz & Levy 2000: 173). Once established, such norms are difficult to shift. As Room (1982: 448) observed, cultural change comes slowly and unpredictably, particularly if someone is trying to engineer it from outside.

43 Northern Territory Aboriginal people ceased to be labelled 'wards' in 1964. This change brought restrictions on their civil rights, including the right to possess and consume alcohol, to an end.

44 Continental southern Europe is made up of predominantly wine-consuming countries where wine is usually drunk with meals and usually in moderate amounts, although, as Room and Mäkelä (2000) have cautioned, one should be sceptical about the idealisation of drinking in these countries. Northern European countries, including Scandinavia and the United Kingdom, can be typified as beer- or spirits-drinking societies, as they have different consumption traditions to those further south. Prior to the introduction of the potato, beer was a major source of nourishment for central and northern Europe, with 'beer soup' being consumed for breakfast (Schivelbusch 1993: 22). However, even this north-south distinction is becoming blurred, as wine consumption increases in northern Europe and beer consumption rises in Mediterranean countries (Hupkens et al. 1993).

A seductive—but elusive—goal

The idea that people could be formally taught good habits of drinking, and that these would replace bad habits, has been a recurrent theme over many decades. It is a seductive idea, especially in cultures imbued with a strong belief in human perfectibility, such as American, British and Nordic cultures.⁴⁵ However, to say that drinking alcohol is, or can be, learned, perhaps by using the ‘instructive information’ of which Whitaker wrote in her etiquette manual, or through the use of staged, pretend bars set up in the alcoholics’ wards of hospitals,⁴⁶ seems to present the idea rather too neatly. It is ‘redolent of knowledge gravely imparted and respectfully received’, as Justin Willis (2002: 9) rather tartly put it. The process of learning, of course, is far more indirect, chaotic and ad hoc than one might think. Even the social-learning researchers were uncomfortably aware that people are influenced indirectly and contagiously by those around them. They found, for example, that research subjects who were exposed to heavy drinkers drank more than subjects who were exposed to light drinkers (Collins & Marlatt 1981)—that is, that low-risk, normal drinkers, increase their consumption if they drink with ‘pretend’ heavy drinkers; and that people who drink in groups tend to adjust the pace of their drinking to the fastest drinker among the group (Watson & Sobell 1982, Heath 2000, Ormerod & Wiltshire 2009). Social-learning researchers noted that it was difficult for subjects to maintain moderation after treatment when they were re-exposed to the same environments and the same reinforcing stimuli that had influenced them in the first place (Strickler et al. 1976). These research studies, including ethnographic observational studies, reinforce what common sense tells us about drinking: that people ‘learn’, or are influenced informally, by how those around them are drinking.

The idea that Indigenous drinking patterns were learned from Europeans on the frontier has been criticised as presenting a static view of Indigenous patterns of behaviour, as if, once adopted, such patterns were incapable of change (Saggers & Gray 1998: 78).⁴⁷ There is undoubtedly some truth in this critique. While many other variables influence drinking behaviour,

45 Robin Room, pers comm, 6 March 2013.

46 For example, in the 1970s, seven-week training sessions for ‘excessive drinkers’ were conducted in a simulated bar in the Psychiatry Department of the Baltimore City Hospital (Strickler et al. 1976).

47 Kunitz and Levy (1974), writing of changing ideas about alcohol use among the Navajo in the 1970s, found that they had reconsidered earlier interpretations of heavy drinking and redefined it as deviant.

and while there have been some changes, there has also been considerable persistence in longstanding patterns of consumption that tend towards episodic heavy drinking.⁴⁸ Jeffery Stead (1980) argued that the patterns of alcohol use apparent in the late 1970s varied between different Aboriginal groups depending on their historical circumstances, exposure to different policies, contact with Europeans and individual social and cultural organisation. Serving as a reminder of the importance of the setting or context in which alcohol use is learned, Stephen Kunitz and Jerrold Levy's (Kunitz et al. 1971, Kunitz & Levy 1994) groundbreaking long-term research revealed significant differences in drinking patterns and disease outcomes between the neighbouring Navajo and Hopi peoples of Arizona. Both these Native American groups learned alcohol use in the nineteenth century by observing Anglo-American frontiersmen, but their established cultural values influenced their adoption of the colonists' drinking styles. The Navajo drank overtly in flamboyant binges, whereas the few Hopi who drank did so in a covert and clandestine way to avoid being ostracised by other Hopi. The two groups lived close to each other and were socio-economically similar, but their different approaches to drinking alcohol resulted in different patterns of morbidity and mortality. Comparing them demonstrates the significance of different styles of drinking as a determinant of health and illness.

Australian data on Aboriginal drinking styles are not disaggregated by locality. Therefore, a comparative study of Aboriginal Australians is not feasible, but it is plausible to conclude that the effects of alcohol consumption will vary according to learned styles of consumption. Historically, and still today, there are few accounts of sensible alcohol use by Aboriginal people, perhaps because it is not thought worthy of reporting (cf. Broome 2005: 25). Nevertheless, we know that there has been change in the choice of drinks. Devoted Aboriginal drinkers in rural and remote areas have largely moved on from drinking fortified wine (port) from flagons or bottles as they did in the 1960s and 1970s; now they prefer sweet wines such as moselle or 'fruity lexia' drunk from casks, or spirits and pre-mixed drinks in cans. In 2000, Kunitz and Levy (2000: 159) reported that among the Navajo Indians of Arizona and New Mexico there had been a shift from fortified wine to beer. After 30 years of

48 Unfortunately, irregular, episodic heavy drinking is one of the most damaging ways of consuming alcohol: it is associated with coronary heart disease, stroke and diabetes. These diseases are exceptions to the usual dose-response relationship between the volume of alcohol consumption and the burden of disease (Room et al. 2005: 520).

research among the Navajo, they also found signs that, despite consistent peer pressure to drink, drinking behaviour was potentially moderating, as implied by declines in mortality and amounts of alcohol consumed. In 1994, they had noted milder drinking styles among Navajos living permanently off-reservation (Kunitz & Levy 1994). Kunitz and Levy (2000: 159) hypothesised that:

It may be due to increasing exposure to a variety of different, and more moderate, drinking styles, although our data are not really adequate to deal with this issue ... the shift from wine to beer is important as a marker of a profound change in tastes and, we believe, as an indication of the penetration of the Navajo economy and culture by the advertisers' art and the tastes of the larger regional population.

Despite the scepticism expressed by some commentators about the rather too orderly implications of the idea of a formalised process of learning how to drink (and re-learning how to drink differently), the idea persists that people can be taught to drink in a different way. Certainly, Aboriginal people themselves believe that they learned their (mostly bad) habits of drinking by observation—initially by watching Europeans' public drinking behaviour and, later, by seeing and following the behaviour of their own family members. Further, in Australia as elsewhere, Indigenous people still express a wistful desire for someone to 'teach' them how to drink and often lament the fact that Europeans never inducted them into the proper use of alcohol. In 1972, John Lame Deer, a Sioux medicine man, wrote with grim humour:

Those clever white men always try to teach us poor, dumb Indians something new. I sure wish they'd teach us how to drink. When you buy a camera or a tape recorder, it always comes with a little booklet which tells you how to use it, but when they brought us the white man's whisky, they forgot the instruction book. This has caused us no end of trouble. (Lame Deer & Erdoes 1972: 71)

In the 1980s, another Native American account compared 'Indian drinking' to white men's drinking with a similar message:

'See, a white man could sit around, drink with a cup—he mimed drinking tea, little finger in the air—'go for maybe four to five hours. White man enjoys it and don't get quite as intoxicated. You give a quart to one of our guys, he drinks it up, chugs it down, jus' like he used to when it was illegal. Never learned how to drink'. (Lincoln & Slagle 1987: 26)

Although many white Australians drink to excess,⁴⁹ Aboriginal people compare their own drinking unfavourably to the drinking practices of settler Australians, and they express the view that their people should learn to drink like the white man.⁵⁰ For example, at Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land, soon after the repeal of restrictions on consumption in 1964, Yolngu objected to the licensing of a hotel and bottle shop only a few kilometres from their community. With the failure of their objection, and realising that community members would now go to town to drink, the Yirrkala Village Council said that 'Aborigines should learn to drink, like the wise white citizens drink—not too much'. Council member Roy Marika suggested that Yolngu could have a wet canteen as a way of avoiding trouble, 'spoiling *manikay* [clan songs], hurting women and children, and [training] Yolngu to drink sensibly'.⁵¹

The idea—the aspiration—that people can set aside habitual drinking customs of excess and learn to 'carry their drink like gentlemen' still has traction 80 years after Whitaker's missive on polite drinking. Politicians still yearn for the 'Mediterranean style' of drinking to become the norm in Australian cities. Aboriginal people in remote communities continue to grapple with the dilemmas of alcohol availability, pressures to revoke restrictions and policy options that allow for limited, controlled access. Faced with seemingly endless uproar around alcohol availability and alcohol-related trouble, Aboriginal community leaders—even those who usually support strict controls and dry communities—sometimes relent and once again invoke the desire that people should learn to do better. In 2014, Noel Pearson was reported as suggesting that:

If there is a model that can encourage responsible drinking then I think it is worth trialling. The ideal position is that we don't have alcohol in Aboriginal communities because alcohol and the strong kinship don't mix, they drink until there is nothing left. But if Indigenous communities insist that they have the same rights as other Australians to have a drink, then they have to learn to drink responsibly like the Greek people, the Chinese people, the whitefellas. (cited by M McKenna 2014: 5)

49 A 2016 poll of Australian attitudes and behaviours around alcohol found that 37 per cent of drinkers (more than 4 million people) drink to get drunk (FARE 2016).

50 See Brady (1995) for further examples of Aboriginal men comparing their drinking to that of white Australians.

51 Notes from Yirrkala Village Council meeting, 14 October 1970, courtesy of Dr Nancy Williams.

This text is taken from *Teaching 'Proper' Drinking?: Clubs and pubs in Indigenous Australia*, by Maggie Brady, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.