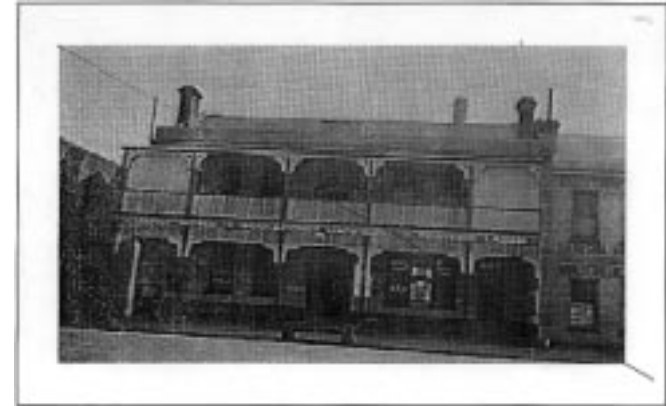


A Colonial Pub Crawl

IT IS 1889. YOU ARE TIRED, thirsty and in search of a congenial place to rest your feet amidst the hurly-burly of the boom-time metropolis of Melbourne. You walk through the front door of the two-storey, rough-cut bluestone hotel in Franklin Street, near the Victoria Market. The building has a simple hipped roof, french windows either side of the door and two symmetrical brick chimneys. Unusually, the public house is not located on a corner, but ‘in the middle of a line of street’.¹ You have heard of Mac’s Hotel, famed for being the coaching terminus from which eager prospectors set off for the Victorian diggings, gold dust in their eyes, and the place to where they returned, more often unsuccessful than not (see Plate 1). Built in 1853 for publican John McMillan, Mac’s Hotel—with its array of discreet parlours and rowdy public bar downstairs, six bedrooms upstairs and one hundred horse stalls outside—welcomed the dreamers and the disaffected alike. But you have no time for history. You are thirsty and tired. You walk up to the bar and are greeted by your host, Mrs Margaret Tobin. You are not surprised to discover that the publican is a woman. Margaret has been the licensee at Mac’s since 1887, and if you were to return to the hotel six years later, you would still find her name hanging above the front door.

Replenished, you go on your way, as so many before you have, and will continue to do; hotels specialise in human traffic. Perhaps you, or your fellow riders, wander east and then down Swanston Street. At the corner of Swanston and La Trobe Streets, you come to the Travellers Home Hotel, built in 1850. Ten of its twenty-three licensees have been women; Mrs Kate Foster holds court there now. Further along Swanston Street is



1. *Mac's Hotel, Franklin Street, Melbourne, c.1933.*

the Strangers Home Hotel; the current publican, Mrs Nightingale, is one of eighteen women to hold the licence for these premises. Next to St Paul's Cathedral, on the corner of Flinders Lane, is the Cathedral Hotel, under the eleven-year reign of Mrs Maria Thompson. Down to Elizabeth Street now, and the Golden Fleece Hotel. Licensed Victualler: Mrs Maria Graham. Further west along Elizabeth Street, you come to the Sportsmen's Club Hotel, where Mrs Annie Robertson plays 'mine host'.

Once on Bourke Street, you have fifty-four hotels to soothe what ails you. Why not try Miss Annie Mulligan's Excelsior Hotel? In 1854, the leader of the gold diggers' rebellion at Eureka, Peter Lalor, took refuge in the attic here, when the hotel was known as the National. Or Mrs Hampden's Rose of Melbourne or Mrs Pasquin's Foley's Hotel. The long-serving Mrs Annie Bulgaer of the Farmers Club Hotel is sure to please; there's not much she wouldn't have seen in her eighteen years as a publican. At the American Bar Hotel, you'll find Mrs Haines and her lavish 'Yankee' bar fittings, which have been a feature of the better-patronised goldfield hotels since the mid-1850s.²

But if you are looking for a real treat, a lush banquet of European opulence peppered with colonial hospitality, you must stop for a while on the hill at the corner of Bourke and William Streets. You have arrived at the legendary Menzies Hotel, built in 1867 for Archibald Menzies (see Plate 2). With its five storeys, eighty bedrooms, grand dining room, two

large billiard rooms, eight private sitting rooms, music room, drawing room, lounge and public bar, kitchen, laundries and servants' quarters, the Menzies was lauded as the finest hotel in the colony to that time. Step inside, take a deep breath, and appreciate the 'unheard-of display of rich panelling, carved stairways, glittering gas chandeliers, resplendent curtainings, thick carpets, and elaborate furniture'.³ Sample the 'rich exotic food', prepared under the direction of a former Buckingham Palace chef, and then seek out the manager of this empire of salutation: you want to thank her. Mrs Catherine Menzies descends from her residential wing upstairs. She took over the licence from Archibald almost ten years ago, and will oversee the hotel's trade for another decade. You are a humble patron indeed, compared to the list of rich and famous who have sought her custom, but she graciously accepts your accolades and wishes you well on your journey.

You are at the business end of town now, where the other half drinks. At the Four Courts Hotel on the corner of William and Little Collins Streets, Mrs R. Clifford is the licensee. And then there is the competition: the Law Courts Hotel, corner William and Little Bourke, where you will find Mrs Wishart hosting the legal eagles. These women would have heard some tales in their time, but perhaps none so sad as the story



2. *Menzies Hotel, Bourke Street, Melbourne, c.1870.*

of the Shamrock Hotel, just up the road on Little Bourke Street. This hotel was built in 1862. In 1868 the licence was taken by Michael O'Brien, who ran the business with his wife, Ellen, until his death on 28 February 1870. Not a month later, on 9 March, the widow Ellen buried her only child, Catherine, who had also died at the hotel. But Ellen stayed on at her public house, despite its horrors, and continued with the business until 1874, when the licence was transferred to Michael Walsh. In 1882, the records show that a Mrs Ellen Walsh took the licence; she ran the hotel until 1890. Could this be the same Ellen, married to a second Michael and living with her ghosts in the same hotel for twenty-eight years? Perhaps you could ask her, if dutch courage prevails.

Or maybe you could ask another widow what it is like to reside in the same city hotel for over three decades. Up on the corner of Queen and Little Bourke, at the Harp of Erin, you will meet Mrs Bridget Stapleton, who ran the hotel with her husband Stephen from 1868 to 1889 and then took on the licence by herself for another ten years. Kitty-corner, at the Sorrento Hotel, built by Mrs Marion Lane in 1876, the licensee is now Mrs Annie Coffin, morbid by name, not by nature.

This is how I imagine a pub crawl in central Melbourne, 1889, might proceed. The list of female publicans running city hotels in this year is representative, but not exhaustive. The tour could equally have taken place in Collingwood, or Carlton, or Sydney, or Hobart. The picture is the same—women at the helm of hotels whose names bear the weight of Australia's history, symbolism and identity: shearers and sportsmen, patriots and sycophants, elitists and commoners, church and state, the possessive and the dispossessed, the homesick and the homespun. The names tell the stories—the National, the American Bar, the Golden Fleece, the Menzies, the Four Courts, the Strangers Home, the Shamrock, the Harp of Erin, the Cathedral, the Sportsmen's Club, the Farmers Club, Foley's, Mac's—but the story can often belie the name of the proprietor behind the bar. We do not think of nineteenth-century women as authority figures in the realms of politics, pastoralism, religion, sport and patriotism, yet their influence was beyond question in the law and custom of hotelkeeping.

If Margaret Tobin at Mac's represents the close-up vision of the woman as publican, the wide-angle view is just as compelling. Far from being a 'male domain', where all women were relegated to the pitiful margins of public drinking space until the liberating 1970s, the Australian hotel has in fact been an enduring site of female control and in-

dependence. In 1853, women comprised only 2 per cent of the licensees for metropolitan Melbourne. However by 1876, after the boon to the liquor industry that was the Victorian gold rush, this figure had risen to 22 per cent. By 1889, the year of our imaginary pub crawl, 30 per cent of Melbourne's city and suburban hotels were licensed to women. And by the first decades of the twentieth century, over half of Melbourne's hotels had a female licensee. In some districts in this year, particularly the inner city, working-class (and notably Irish) suburbs of Collingwood, Footscray and South Melbourne, the proportion of female publicans was as high as 58 per cent, 62 per cent and 68 per cent respectively. Rates in regional centres such as Ballarat and Bendigo were just as great at the turn of the century. Women continued to represent between 40 and 50 per cent of Victorian licensees until the 1950s.⁴ A tired and thirsty traveller might have enjoyed his drink in the company of men, but he was odds-on to be entering the house of a woman.

Although this trend is apparent in other Australian states, my research focuses on Victoria, where liquor history is particularly noteworthy for many reasons: the goldfields impetus leading to a boom in regional centres and then, by 1900, a scattering of wayside pubs with little population around them; the dense concentration of hotels in metropolitan and suburban Melbourne with an intensely local community focus; the strength of the Methodist–Presbyterian anti-drink movement and an equally significant Irish Catholic tradition of hotelkeeping; and the fact that for sixty or so years after the gold rushes, Melbourne and Victoria set the pace culturally, economically and demographically for the rest of Australia.

As licensees, women were not merely passive front-persons to a social and commercial institution otherwise controlled by men. Of legal necessity, they were the proprietors of their own separate businesses, whose autonomy could not be disputed by court or community. While a great many female publicans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were widows, taking over the licence to the family business after the death of their husband, this was by no means the only route to hotelkeeping for women. Unmarried daughters, spinster sisters and married women unrelated to the previous licensee all successfully applied for the valuable property of a liquor licence. Female publicans often transferred the licences for their hotels to other women, and there were many hotels that saw an unbroken string of up to a dozen women holding sway behind the bar. Clearly, networks of women conspired to pass on the privilege of selling alcohol.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women were not only numerically prominent in the occupation of hotelkeeping, but the hotel itself owed much of its political survival to values that were associated with *female* sex roles: domesticity, respectability and maternal restraint. As the no-nonsense head of the public house, Australian women in hotels have enjoyed a unique social visibility. In the liquor trade journal, the *Vigilante*, a reporter noted in 1930 that 'Rarely a sitting of the Licensing Court passes in Melbourne at which licences are not granted to women'.⁵ Indeed, the history of female publicans runs counter-intuitively to our expectations of 'woman's place' in the pre-modern era. As 'public housekeepers', female licensees performed normative womanly work within the discordant context of a mercantile enterprise.

The traditional authority of female publicans is evident in the faded photographic images that commonly line today's pub walls. Nineteenth-century publicans were particularly fond of using the new technology of photography to immortalise their status as proprietors and community leaders. And there, taking up her rightful position in the foreground of the picture, stands the female hotelkeeper, flanked by staff, children and a smattering of mostly male customers (see Plates 3–6). You can often identify the licensee by her seemly attire, as much by her position as the leader of the communal household. The hotel itself looms large in the background; the human territory is clearly claimed by the woman up front. As was law, the licensee's name hangs above the front door: a sign of possession, a symbol of status, a statement of power.⁶ By reconstructing the hotel as a 'female domain', we can begin to appreciate the pub as an intricate, heterosocial space which has historically relied on the labour, initiative, personalities and devotion of women—as well as the patronage of men—for its founding and continuity as an iconic cultural institution.

One aspect of this complexity is reconciling the pub as the archetypal Australian male social institution with the female publican as the archetypal Australian matriarchal figure. From Henry Lawson to Thea Astley, several generations of literary raconteurs have used the figure of the female hotelkeeper to depict fortitude, resilience, humour, integrity and charm. Given the legendary strength of their spirit, it is no wonder that female publicans have been central figures in many dramatic representations of Australian community life.⁷ Most recently, we have the example of Meredith Monaghan in the ABC's runaway hit, *SeaChange* (1999–2001). The omniscient manager with a finger in every pie, Meredith's character resonated with such a wide national audience precisely because Australians are imbued with a social memory of her kind and



3. Women and children first. Australian Hotel, Clark's Hill, Victoria, c.1890.



5. Acott's Hotel, Bendigo, n.d.



4. Pieper's Hill Hotel, Bendigo, n.d.



6. Blue Bell Inn, Bendigo, n.d.

calling. Female publicans have always stood in close proximity to Australia's cultural epicentre.

As proprietors of the principal colonial social institution, female publicans have also been witnesses to many of Australia's defining historical moments. When Edward Hargreaves found gold in the hills behind Bathurst in 1851, thus sparking the New South Wales gold rushes, the first person to whom he reported his discovery was Susan Lister, the licensee of the Wellington Inn where he was boarding. Mrs Bentley, wife of the publican at the Eureka Hotel, was tried for her part in the fracas which led to the famous goldfields rebellion in 1854. The Glenrowan Hotel, where the legendary bushranger Ned Kelly made his 'last stand' in June 1880, was licensed to Ann Jones, an English widow supporting three children.⁸ Many would know that, in more recent times, Dawn Fraser and Cheryl Barassi have worked as publicans, and this seems fitting: the larrikin Olympic swimmer and outspoken footballer's wife are formidable women. Ambitious, frank and forthright, they are late-twentieth-century embodiments of the stereotypical frontierswoman of our colonial past.

Unearthing the numerical prevalence of women as publicans raises two important questions. First, why were conditions so agreeable for women to be keeping hotels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? How can these arresting figures be explained? And second, why has this tale not been previously told, particularly given the oft-cited significance of public drinking culture to Australia's core values and identity? Clearly, some historical accounting is called for when the records reveal a situation so antithetical to the representations of pub culture that have been central to our national story—a boys' club which privileged men's fantasies over women's dignity.⁹

Neither madonna nor whore, female publicans have mastered the interior territory of the pub with decency and integrity while commanding respect in the broader public sphere for their achievements and status. By challenging the notion of the hotel as anti-home and a place of 'sexual apartheid', it is possible to acknowledge the pub as a place where women have historically lived, loved, worked and taken their leisure; a complex environment that could, as we are so often told, be hostile to women, but could also, as we are less frequently encouraged to believe, be supportive of women's needs and aspirations. By going inside the hotel, and asking to speak to the boss, this book goes where no Australian historian has yet ventured: beyond the Ladies Lounge.