

Consumer Australia

Consumer Australia:
Historical Perspectives

Edited by

Robert Crawford, Judith Smart
and Kim Humphery

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

ROBERT CRAWFORD, JUDITH SMART,
AND KIM HUMPHERY

In their polemical account of contemporary Australian life, Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss assert that a growing number of Australians have been by gripped by an insatiable desire to consume goods and services in ever-increasing quantities:

The problem is not that people own things: the problem is that things own people. It is not consuming but consumerism we criticise; not affluence but affluenza ... most Australians acknowledge that our society is too materialistic and money driven.¹

While Hamilton and Denniss explore the social, cultural, and political ramifications of “affluenza,” their study is silent when it comes to identifying the social and historical forces that have shaped our propensity to consume. It is as though these consumer impulses suddenly emerged from a vacuum and are merely a product of individual greed. Noting that “Contemporary consumer culture applauds freshness and obliterates traditional life,” Susan Strasser offers a partial explanation for Hamilton and Denniss’s silence.² This collection of essays begins to redress this neglect of history, by tracing the roots of Australia’s consumer culture.

Before we begin to trace these beginnings, it is perhaps worth pausing briefly to reflect on what is meant by consumer culture. The growth of research in this area during the last two decades has inevitably produced a proliferation of viewpoints.³ At its most fundamental level, consumer

¹ Clive Hamilton & Richard Denniss, *Affluenza: When too Much is Never Enough* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 17.

² Susan Strasser, “The Alien Past: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Consumer Policy* 26, 4 (2003): 376.

³ For some recent overviews see Eric J Arnold & Craig J Thompson, “Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research,” *Journal of Consumer*

culture or consumer society can be defined as the product of the “historical shift from an economy dominated by production to one strongly influenced by consumption,”⁴ and we take this as our starting point. As such, consumer culture is continually in flux, where new practices coexist with the old.⁵ This dynamic relationship lends itself to historical analysis, and our collection of essays therefore adheres to what Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson label the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, whereby “the driving research problematic is set by the question: what is consumer society and how is it constituted and sustained?”⁶

Historical accounts of the origins of the culture of consumption are divided. In her examination of its historiography, Roberta Sassatelli documents the shift away from productivist explanations focusing on the role played by organised production in determining what was available towards consumer-orientated accounts that emphasise the primacy of consumer desires in deciding what was produced.⁷ The date and location of these origins are similarly equivocal. For some, the foundations of the culture of consumption can be traced back to Western European and North American homes and stores of the 17th and 18th centuries, whilst others contend that its true beginnings can be observed in the emergence of department stores in the late 19th century.⁸

Research 31 (2005): 868–82; Monroe Friedman, “The Consumer Culture Research Landscape,” *Journal of American Culture* 30, 1 (2007): 1–5; Frank Trentmann, “Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, 3 (2004): 373–401.

⁴ Friedman, “The Consumer Culture Research Landscape,” 1–2.

⁵ Strasser, “The Alien Past,” 377. See also Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

⁶ Arnold & Thompson, “Consumer Culture Theory (CCT),” 874.

⁷ Roberta Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics* (London: Sage, 2007), Chapter 1.

⁸ Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2001); Neil McKendrick, “Commercialization and the Economy,” in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England*, ed. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer & John M. Plumb, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 1–33; Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982); Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the Mass American Market* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); Hamish W. Fraser, *Coming of the Mass Market 1850–1914* (London: Macmillan, 1981); William Leach, *Land of*

The emergence of the culture of consumption in Australia is perhaps more straightforward. In *Economics and the Dreamtime*, Noel Butlin explores the nature of Aboriginal economies prior to 1788. As hunter-gatherers, members of Aboriginal societies consumed their own products. Although they manufactured and traded certain objects such as axe heads and pelts, any widespread flow of trade was limited by factors such as isolation, restricted scope for storage, and the broad similarity of supply conditions. Butlin, however, concedes that the true flow of these patterns may not have been fully understood and certainly there is evidence in Western Victoria of goods exchanged having travelled thousands of kilometres.⁹ Nevertheless, the First Fleet would fundamentally alter this way life.

In addition to its cargo of convicts, the First Fleet also imported new cultures—including the culture of consumption. For many of the convicted thieves on board, transportation had been the direct result of giving in to their consumer desires and needs. As the fledgling colony found its feet, the culture of consumption began to take root. The first stores, shops and public houses quickly found a market that was eager to consume their assortment of wares—a growing proportion of which had been produced locally. As Jane Elliott has shown, high wages in the colony allowed convicts access to more and better clothing and other goods than had been possible in Britain, and expenditure on these items served to reduce the outward signs of social difference and status between free and unfree.¹⁰ Over the next decades, the desire to consume scarcely abated and, by the second half of the 19th century, had become ingrained in everyday Australian life. A small but significant number of shop owners capitalised on these desires, using them to convert their modest stores into department stores.¹¹ The urge to consume, as well as the increased capacity to do so, not only provided a boost to local retailers, manufacturers and other

Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

⁹ N.G. Butlin, *Economics and the Dreamtime: A Hypothetical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84–8.

¹⁰ See Jane Elliott, “Was there a Convict Dandy? Convict Consumer Interests in Sydney, 1788–1815”, *Australian Historical Studies* 26, 104 (1995): 373–92.

¹¹ See also Beverley Kingston, *Basket, Bag and Trolley: A History of Shopping in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27–8.

associated industries, it also helped recast Australia as an “urban, commercial, and partly industrial society.”¹²

Scholarly research on the foundations of the culture of consumption in the Australian context has been fragmentary. Charting the growth and development of the Australian economy, economic historians have traditionally viewed consumption as something of a by-product of economic development rather than a central driving force. In *Making the Market*, Greg Whitwell places consumption on centre stage, though, in positing that the real beginnings of Australia’s consumer society lay in the post–Second World War boom, he ignores the degree to which consumption is driven by cultural imperatives. A similar criticism can be levelled at many of the earlier histories of Australia’s leading manufacturers and retailers. Equating vision, hard work, and service with success and progress, these hagiographical accounts have all too frequently interpreted healthy ledgers and the expansion of the company’s premises as reflections of consumer attitudes. This imbalance in the historical scholarship has, however, been partly redressed in more recent years.

Since the early 1990s, historical accounts of shopping have led the way in developing a more multifaceted perspective on the ways that Australians have embraced consumption. Beverley Kingston’s *Basket, Bag and Trolley* provided a short yet important overview of shopping in Australia since 1788. More detailed accounts of shopping, such as Gail Reekie’s examination of interwar department stores and Kim Humphery’s cultural history of supermarkets, have also deepened our understanding of consumption and its inherent complexity.¹³ Archaeology has added further insights into past patterns of consumption as well as the consumers themselves, whilst the discipline of cultural studies has provided additional perspectives on more recent patterns.¹⁴ The increased attention paid to the

¹² Richard Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture since 1788* (Melbourne: Longman Australia, 1995), 85.

¹³ Gail Reekie, *Temptations: Sex, Selling and the Department Store* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1983); Kim Humphery, *Shelf Life: Supermarkets and the Changing Cultures of Consumption* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ See Penny Cook, “Shopping and Historical Archaeology: Exploring the Contexts of Urban Consumption,” *Australasian Historical Archaeology* 18 (2000): 17–28; Mark Staniforth, *Material Culture and Consumer Society: Dependent Colonies in Colonial Australia* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, c.2003); John Fiske, Bob Hodge & Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading*

interaction between consumers and retailers has also resulted in an increased interest in the ways that consumer activism has affected consumption in Australia.¹⁵

Linking manufacturers, retailers, and consumers, the media has played an equally important role in both the creation and the maintenance of a culture of consumption in Australia. While audience studies have long been an integral part of media and communication studies, historical accounts of the media appear to have only recently paid attention to the consumer. Bridget Griffen-Foley's "From *Tit-Bits* to *Big Brother*: A Century of Audience Participation in the Media," as well as the more recent special edition of *Media International Australia* focusing on participation, illustrate the growing interest in this field.¹⁶ Although the historical literature on advertising, marketing, market research and public relations industries has tended to focus on these industries and their activities more than their consumption, researchers have nevertheless been attuned to the pervasive presence of the consumer and have recognised his/her impact.¹⁷ Even so, while consumers and the culture of consumption they inhabit have begun to receive increased attention from scholars, the

Australian Popular Culture (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), Chapter 5. The growing maturity of Australian archaeological studies of consumption is evident in the large project currently being undertaken by Tim Murray, Susan Lawrence, Andrew May, S.C. Hayes, and Linda Young on "Suburban Archaeology: Approaching an Archaeology of the Middle Class in 19th-Century Melbourne."

¹⁵ Judith Smart "Feminists, Food and the Fair Price: The Cost of Living Demonstrations in Melbourne, August/ September 1917," in *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Joy Damousi & Marilyn Lake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 274–301; Amanda McLeod, "Quality Control: The Origins of the Australian Consumers' Association," *Business History* 50, 1 (2008): 79–98. See also Simon Smith, ed., *In the Consumer Interest: A Selected History of Consumer Affairs in Australia 1945–2000* (Melbourne: SOCAP, 2000).

¹⁶ Bridget Griffen-Foley, "From *Tit-Bits* to *Big Brother*: A Century of Audience Participation in the Media," *Media, Culture & Society* 26, 4 (2004): 533–48; *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture and Policy* 130 (2009).

¹⁷ See Robert Crawford, "Emptor Australis: *Emptor Australis*: Constructing the Australian Consumer in Early Twentieth Century Advertising Literature," *Australian Economic History Review* 45, 3 (2005): 221–43; Amanda McLeod, "The Lady Means Business," *Melbourne Historical Journal* (2003): 54–73; Susie Khamis, "Thrift Sacrifice and Bushells Tea: One Brand's Strategy in the Early 1930s," *History Australia* 6, 1 (2009): 07.1–0.7.10.

comparatively small body of published research remains at odds with the impact that they have had on Australian history.

“The cultural history of consumption,” observe Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, “has found a world in which consumers, distributors and producers symbolically came together, and out of whose encounter emerged not only new methods of selling and to some extent production, but also what might be designated a ‘consumer culture’.”¹⁸ The diverse contributions in this collection not only seek to reflect this world, they also offer a response to Frank Trentmann’s call for a “more ambitious and ecumenical view of consumption, no longer limited to shopping and the market.”¹⁹ The following chapters have been divided into three sections: selling, buying, and exchanging. These categories are not intended to be mutually exclusive and there is obvious slippage between these different aspects of the consumption process/es. However, they do provide an opportunity to explore the different components of consumer culture and its development in Australia.

Chapters contained in the first section focus on selling and the issues associated with it. Selling is a defining element of consumer culture that differentiates it from other systems such as bartering. Far from viewing this process as a simple exchange of capital for goods or services, the chapters in this section explore the ways that selling has developed as well as its impact—on both the seller and the purchaser. Susie Khamis’s overview of the means by which the Bushells brand was established during the late 19th and early 20th centuries provides an insight into the tactics manufacturers used to cultivate a position for their wares in a marketplace saturated with like products. As Khamis reveals, the quality of Bushells’ product ran second to the quality of its selling, whereby “Bushells promised consumers not ‘just’ tea, but some purchase into a better and more modern way of life.” Such dreams were also cultivated by Sir Harold Clapp, the subject of John Sinclair’s chapter. Charting the extraordinary range of initiatives implemented by Clapp in the interwar

¹⁸ Geoffrey Crossick & Serge Jaumain, “The World of the Department Store: Distribution, Culture and Social Change,” in *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1859–1939*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick & Serge Jaumain (Aldershot: Ashgate 1999), 1–2.

¹⁹ Frank Trentmann, “Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, 3 (2004): 373–401.

period to increase patronage of the Victorian Railways and, indeed, extend its services, Sinclair contends that Clapp was selling much more than train tickets: ‘Clapp’s significance is not so much in the particular forms of consumption that he introduced ... but more in the fostering of a move to a mass consumption in general’. While the statistics certainly reveal that levels of consumption had escalated rapidly during the first decades of the 20th century, they also show that consumption was brought to a sudden halt by the Great Depression of the 1930s and then the Second World War. In his chapter on the ways that Australia’s manufacturing, retail, and advertising industries dealt with the shift from a seller’s market to a buyer’s market, Robert Crawford highlights the deep-seated fear that Australians might have forgotten how to consume. By charting these industries’ efforts to “convince consumers that consumption was necessary, normal, and beneficial,” Crawford’s chapter underscores the degree to which consumer culture needed to be sold before it could be embraced. However, once consumers embraced this culture, they were defined by it. This is reflected in Natasha Campo’s chapter on the emergence of the “24-Hour Woman” in the pages of *Cleo* and *Cosmopolitan*. The 24-Hour Woman of the 1980s was celebrated as the modern embodiment of the liberated woman, free to live her life, on her own terms, 24 hours a day. Concluding that “collective knowledge about feminism was shaped by consumerism, advertising, and other global discourses in the popular media,” Campo reveals that the 24-Hour Woman was little more than a convenient image that could be packaged and sold to female consumers. Here, as in each of the other chapters from this section, it is apparent that the development of a consumer culture in Australia (and indeed elsewhere) owes as much to the selling of these dreams as it does to the selling of consumer wares. As John Brewer and Frank Trentmann note in *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives*, “People have dreams and desires of consuming long before they reach a shop counter to purchase a particular item.”²⁰

The chapters contained in the second section focus on the flipside of selling—buying. Synonymous with consumption, buying inevitably occupies a central position in consumer culture. The chapters in this section view buying as an ongoing and active process that is not restricted to the act of purchase or shopping. Within this process, the consumer

²⁰ John Brewer & Frank Trentmann, “Introduction: Space, Time and Value in Consuming Cultures,” in *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges*, ed. John Brewer & Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 3.

occupies a central position, and the chapters by Judith Smart and Amanda McLeod analyse the emergence of a consumer identity. Smart's chapter on the Housewives' Associations between 1915 and 1950 charts the rise of Australia's first consumer organisations and suggests reasons for their decline after the 1960s. It reveals how consumer identities were forged in relation to other identities, in this case, women's roles as homemakers. While these common interests effectively united them as consumers, Smart also reveals that their long-term fragility was responsible for the Housewives' Associations' demise. Competing economic identities "as wives and daughters and sisters of working men, employers and businessmen, or as members of regional communities" made it difficult for these organisations to sustain agreement on issues over time and maintain a stable platform for action. Similar tensions can be discerned in McLeod's survey of the Victorian Consumers Protection Council in the late 1960s. Here, the struggle is located within government ranks, as legislators seek to define what exactly constituted the "consumer interest" and how it should be met. Observing the ways that government interests did not necessarily equate with consumer interest, McLeod underscores the impact of broader influences on the conceptualisation of the consumer. Such influences prompt her to conclude that "attending to the consumer interest will always be complex, controversial and contested." Both Smart and McLeod pay heed to Trentmann's assertion that studies of the consumer should explore the "processes of identity and knowledge formation that criss-cross the market or occur altogether outside its domain."²¹ The remaining chapters in this section similarly highlight these influences, albeit in different settings. Matthew Bailey's chapter on the reception of regional shopping centres in the 1960s reveals that buying was not the only practice to be altered by these new complexes: "People came to shop ... and meet up, spend time together, chat, browse, enjoy a meal, work, pass the time ... and shop again." As a social activity, the act of buying (and the conceptualisation of consumer identity with it) came to be influenced by a new range of issues. In his survey of wine consumption in the 1950s through to the 1980s, David Dunstan contends that "patterns of consumption do not change overnight." Illustrating how the increasing levels of wine consumed "coincided with population growth, increased wealth and leisure and new demands for social activities such as entertaining and dining out," Dunstan similarly underscores the impact of

²¹ Frank Trentmann, "Knowing Consumers—Histories, Identities, Practices: An Introduction," in *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 5.

“wider demographic, technological, economic and cultural contexts” that have affected, and, indeed, continue to affect, the ways that Australian consumers buy and behave.

Exchanging is the theme of our third and final section. The chapters contained in this section focus on broad, consumption-generated changes, whereby old habits, routines and traditions have been exchanged for new ones. While it could be argued that each purchase has an impact on the consumer’s day-to-day existence, the chapters here develop a macro-perspective as they follow the course of these changes and exchanges over an extended period of time. Moya McFadzean thus charts the changing contents of women’s glory boxes between the 1930s and 1960s. ‘[A] tangible expression of female transition, from single to married state’, the glory box is also used by McFadzean to illustrate the transition from producer to consumer at an individual level. In observing that the contents of these glory boxes ‘gradually shifted from an emphasis on women’s own hand-made production to the purchase of the ready-made’, this chapter reveals that this process of exchange was not sudden. The exchange that forms the basis of Tony Dingle’s chapter also concerns time. Looking at the experiences of Australian housewives from the 1920s to the 1980s, Dingle explores the ways that time-saving appliances (such as vacuum cleaners, dish washers, etc) affected housekeeping activities. Significantly, Dingle observes that the shortened hours devoted to housekeeping came to be counterbalanced by time-using technologies (such as television). He also observes further exchanges that were altering suburban life, noting that “Recreation was becoming increasingly privatised and domesticated ... consumerism was keeping the family together in the home.” In Seamus O’Hanlon’s chapter, it is the home itself that is ultimately being consumed. However, the exchange here returns to the shift from production to consumption. O’Hanlon analyses the “Red Tulip warehouses” and the transformation of this site “from a place of industry, employment and production in the first half of the twentieth century to one of residence, leisure and consumption today.” His study underscores the degree to which modes of consumption—both past and present—reflect broader social, cultural, and economic trends and developments. Kim Humphery’s chapter similarly traverses the past and the present in order to reflect on the uniqueness of Australia’s consumer culture. Searching for the roots of Australian materialism that lie in its colonial beginnings, Humphery questions the degree to which Australians had exchanged one lifestyle for another. In positing that historical antecedents have indeed informed “the material practices that characterise the life-world we now

inhabit [as well as the] practices that remain still to be confronted,” Humphery not only establishes a consistent thread between the past and present modes of consumption in the Australian context, he also provides a rationale for each of the chapters contained in this collection.

PART I:

SELLING

CHAPTER ONE

CLASS IN A TEA CUP: THE BUSHELLS BRAND, 1895–1920

SUSIE KHAMIS

In January 1895, readers of the *Bulletin* were introduced to Alfred Thomas Bushell by way of an advertisement. It featured a striking portrait of the bearded, balding 61-year-old, drinking from a cup stamped with his namesake—Bushells Tea. The simplicity of the image was matched by the brevity of the pitch: “None pure and genuine without this signature upon each package of tea.”¹ Since its introduction two years earlier, the Bushells brand had showcased the essence of modern marketing practice; the product, a staple of everyday Australian life, was now being imbued with a new range of ideals and associations. Thus, with its appeals to glamour, prestige and progress—all in the semiotic space of a single tea cup—Bushells proved a fitting harbinger of contemporary brand culture. If the right tea could offer cache and class, there was virtually no limit to the transformative powers of the branding process, or, indeed, the extent to which brand logic could mesh with the pace and character of modern life.

Twelve years before his appearance in the *Bulletin*, Alfred Bushell had commenced business under the name Bushell & Company, selling Bushells Tea (and, on a smaller scale, Bushells Coffee) throughout Queensland. Since its humble beginnings, the brand’s growth and development has closely paralleled the changing character of Australian consumption. As the separate colonial economies matured into a single, more sophisticated and internationalist economy, Bushells imbued an otherwise unremarkable product with the airs and inclinations of an emerging demographic: the urban middle class. This chapter considers those processes that transformed Australia’s consumer culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the point that, by the 1920s, this brand of

¹ *Bulletin*, June 5, 1895, 18.

tea was offering not merely superior taste and value but also the myths and motifs of modernity.

A maturing marketplace

Bushells fashioned an image closely tied to a distinctly middle-class mindset, as this was the most compelling force in the 19th-century Australian marketplace.² The brand's ascent signalled an important shift in the nation's economy. Prior to the mid-19th century, most Australian households had a rather indiscriminate approach to sourcing basic provisions. Many still retained some connection to the land, usually by way of fruit trees or a vegetable patch. Cows were also kept for private supplies of milk, butter and cream. Itinerant salespeople offered fish, bread or ice, whilst the local grocery store, which was usually within walking distance, stocked the other household requirements. From the closing decades of the 19th century, though, the rise and influence of an educated and propertied class helped recast the nature and direction of the Australian marketplace. To this end, two processes were especially important. First, between 1831 and 1850, the Australian colonies admitted over 170,000 immigrants from the United Kingdom, a third of whom had paid their own fare. This group contained a core of highly qualified and ambitious professionals. While many had struggled to make a mark in British society, they were of "respectable" standing nonetheless. For these "new chums," Australia provided a second chance.³ Second, the gold rushes had an equally profound effect on the size and make-up of Australian society. The discovery of alluvial gold in both New South Wales and Victoria in 1851, and the subsequent spike in the number of gold-seekers arriving in the colonies, not only multiplied Australia's export earnings; they also boosted its labour force, stretched its skills base, and fostered material conditions that far outlasted the boom itself.

This influx of migrants effectively laid the groundwork for an advanced state of consumer capitalism in the Australian colonies. After 1850, capitalist production was the nation's pre-eminent economic imperative, with the expansion and diversification in commodity production and distribution. Andrew Wells thus notes, that from the mid-

² Andrew Wells, *Constructing Capitalism: An Economic History of Eastern Australia, 1788–1901* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989).

³ K.S. Inglis, *Australian Colonists: An Exploration of Social History 1788–1870* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993), 23.

19th century, a combination of domestic needs as well as the requirements of British and world markets helped transform the Australian economy into a predominantly capitalist one. Gold and wool had been the principal Australian commodities sold on the imperial and international markets between 1850 and 1890. By century's end, "a wider range of pastoral, agricultural, mineral and processed primary commodities" were being traded, reflecting the expansion of intra-colonial and inter-colonial trade.⁴ Colonial capitalists, particularly those working with merchants and finance capitalists in Britain, were well positioned to direct and exploit lucrative opportunities in the growing economy. As early as 1891, almost two-thirds of the Australian population were living in cities or towns, a proportion that was not matched by either the United States until 1920, or Canada until 1950.⁵

With commercial trade growing and the middle class occupying an increasingly central place in urban development, a necessary change occurred in the way that advertisers addressed consumers. Increasingly, points of status, prestige and distinction were woven into all kinds of commodities. This was not done in any tangible, quantifiable way but at a connotative, associational level. Turn-of-the-century advertisements in the *Bulletin* illustrate how Australia's tea traders deployed this dynamic. The copy in these advertisements relied more on allusions and imagery than attributes and availability—what the tea "meant" effectively mattered more than what the tea "did." With the rate of tea consumption in Australia growing, the nation's tea traders understood that tea "meant" profit. As Michael Cannon notes, "many comfortable middle-class importers' and retailers' fortunes were being founded on the habit."⁶ Tea advertisements reflect the habit's spread. Highlighting its distribution networks, one advertiser stated: "The London & Sydney Tea Co.'s Tea—Chests delivered free to any RAILWAY STATION or PORTS in NEW SOUTH WALES."⁷ Colonial borders were no barrier to another advertiser: "Drink Cup Blend Tea. Unrivalled in quality. ALL storekeepers in NSW

⁴ Andrew Wells, *Constructing Capitalism: An Economic History of Eastern Australia, 1788–1901* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 2.

⁵ N.G. Butlin, *Investment in Australian Economic Development, 1861–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 181.

⁶ Michael Cannon, *Life in the Cities: Australia in the Victorian Age—3* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1974), 183.

⁷ *Bulletin*, October 15, 1892, 17.

and Queensland.”⁸ Other advertisements illustrate the growing competition between the different brands. “Every variety of TEA! And each of unrivalled excellence, delivered free by Atcherley & Dawson,” exclaimed one advertiser, as its competitor emphatically declared “Globe Teas have NO equal.”⁹ The breadth of tea’s appeal was such that, in an increasingly nuanced marketplace, the scope for profit was considerable.

Class-conscious branding

For the Bushell family, the post-Federation period provided the perfect opportunity to expand the company’s operations and boost the brand’s up-market image. In 1902, Alfred Bushell entered a partnership with his sons, Alfred Walter and Philip Howard. By 1912, their firm had become a public company, Bushells Limited, with a paid-up capital of £15,000 and Philip as chairperson. As it happened, the brand’s growth already owed much to the siblings’ efforts as the “Tea-Men of Australia.” Their extensive nationwide travels to promote their father’s brand meant that they were sufficiently informed to assume its control. In 1913, the company’s headquarters were established on Sydney’s George Street, and further land was bought on Harrington Street in the neighbouring Rocks area in 1919. Over the next few years, the brand spread into Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania. The Victorian operation recommenced in 1922, having been closed in 1904 to allow concentration on the New South Wales market.

The increased urbanisation of Australian society during the 19th century had a direct impact on the ways that brands like Bushells imagined their consumers. Mindful that middle-class mobility turned attention to all signs of rank, advertisers pitched quality, taste and distinction to prospective consumers. Such traits were attributed to products as pedestrian as laundry powder, shoe polish, mouthwash and tea. The Bushells brand was situated within this shiny new world, and its advertisements tempted fashionable Australians to follow suit. Significantly, this cued a thematic break from other popular tea brands of the time, like Swagman Blend, Pannikin Blend, and Billy Tea. Whereas these brands had espoused the rustic charm of the “the bush,” a motif that had wide

⁸ *Bulletin*, May 25, 1895, front cover; June 1, 1895, front cover; June 8, 1895, front cover.

⁹ *Bulletin*, May 29, 1897, 3; June 5, 1897, 3; August 4, 1900, 12; August 18, 1900, 12; August 25, 1900, 14.

populist appeal in the late 19th century, the Bushells brand of the early 1920s forged a far more glamorous image. Its cultural debt was to a very different ensemble of influences; it quoted New York and Art Deco, matinee shows and jazz.

Modernity and the *Sydney Mail*

Several Bushells advertisements appearing in the *Sydney Mail* during the early 1920s illustrate how the advertiser eschewed the rustic charm of bush populism in favour of courting the avaricious middle class. Bushells integrated the pace and glamour of the “Roaring Twenties” into these advertisements in order to project a sophisticated, discerning and modern image. The company attracted the status-seeking suburbanite by incorporating associations that already enjoyed middle-class approval, and its advertisements in the *Sydney Mail* from this period reflect the brand’s growing identification with a particular middle-class consumer: the discerning, discriminating female. The vignettes considered here feature two recurring motifs that both point towards a specific cultural and aesthetic disposition: the beautifully groomed female, and the exotic glamour of the Indian sub-continent. A more nuanced understanding of these images can be obtained by examining the influences informing them, especially the extent to which Bushells took its promotional cues from America’s Madison Avenue—the venerated “home” of advertising.

In several of the Bushells *Sydney Mail* advertisements, the product is almost sidelined by the centrality of a well-groomed and attractive woman. Moreover, it is clear from the accompanying copy that this figure inhabits a specific social arena, the middle-class household, and readers are prompted to identify with her. Whether these tableaux position this female looking out into the front garden (“Proud of the Tea You served your Guests?”¹⁰), awaiting a housemaid (“Tired! Languid! After Shopping, Matinee, or Household Duties”¹¹—Figure 1 above), or in a hotel lobby (“Peggy from Sydney has ‘Pink Tea’ with Betty in New York”¹²), the message remains consistent: Bushells tea befits the elegant, fashionable lady. (The nod to New York is telling: such imagery placed Bushells alongside American brands that used scenes of glamour and prestige for similar effect.) These women are all suitably coiffed and accessorised, with

¹⁰ *Sydney Mail*, July 7, 1930, 20.

¹¹ *Sydney Mail*, June 23, 1920, 32.

¹² *Sydney Mail*, October 20, 1920, 24.



FIGURE 1.1 Bushells' class-conscious consumer. Advertisement for Bushells. *Sydney Mail*, 23 June 1920. Image courtesy of Unilever Australasia.

bob-cuts and pearls, and their elongated, slender figures reflect the period's preference for the streamlined form. However, it is their overriding concern for social propriety that most vividly underscores their acute class consciousness.

This series might well include another three Bushells advertisements: in these the glamorous consumer seems absent, yet her class sensibility

remains very much present. All three make oblique reference to the relatively high price of Bushells tea, but resolve this concern by subsuming it to the more urgent consideration of social respectability. The first of these advertisements has two formally attired men seated at what appears to be a restaurant table: “My Wife Says Tea is Higher Tom. What Sort of Tea Does Your Wife Buy?”¹³ In the second, “Mrs Macluran,” a “manageress” from the Wentworth Hotel, offers “Advice to Housewives on the Cost of Tea.”¹⁴ The third advertisement depicts two sets of hands; one is clutching a nameless canister, the other a tin of Bushells. “Do You Guess or Do You Know?” it asks, before explaining the quandary that is literally at hand: “Decide to make your hands resist that temptation to ‘guess’ at the quantity the teapot needs.”¹⁵ Bushells may have been more expensive, but consumers could take solace in the fact that their purchase was worth it.

Alternatively, several Bushells advertisements reference the Oriental allure of Ceylon, which had become one of Australia’s main sources of tea. Some of these figures are male, such as the turbaned tea-curer (“When Rama Swami Smiles His Pleasure—You’ll Smile Your Pleasure, Too”¹⁶) and the bare-chested tea-picker (“Young, tender leaves, picked fresh and cured slowly and gradually, so as to hold their juicy sap”¹⁷). Others are female and are discernibly younger, curvier, and more nubile than the Anglo-Australian consumers featured in the aforementioned series. Such images include the long-limbed beauty peering over her shoulder and raising a single tea leaf (“Freshly Picked Tea—Slowly Cured—Holds that Delicious Tea-Sap Flavor That You’ll Love”¹⁸); the bejewelled, wide-eyed girl, kneeling beside a small tea plant, baring both her knees and her décolletage (“This Little Tender Leaf Drinks the Sunkissed Dew for its Lovely Flavour”¹⁹—Figure 2 below); and the voluptuous “Napuli,” with her back arched and eyes closed (“Come pluck your leaves ere the Sun steals off with the Flavor of the Juicy sap”²⁰).

There is an obvious dichotomy here between blue-eyed cultivation and dark-skinned naturalness. On the one hand, Bushells was promoting the

¹³ *Sydney Mail*, February 18, 1920, 33.

¹⁴ *Sydney Mail*, March 31, 1920, 29.

¹⁵ *Sydney Mail*, May 19, 1920, 13.

¹⁶ *Sydney Mail*, October 6, 1920, 26.

¹⁷ *Sydney Mail*, November 17, 1920, 21.

¹⁸ *Sydney Mail*, November 3, 1920, 24.

¹⁹ *Sydney Mail*, April 7, 1920, 30.

²⁰ *Sydney Mail*, May 5, 1920, 30.

credentials of its source. Ceylon is defined as a place of exacting and uncompromising standards, and therefore worthy of middle-class patronage. On the other hand, its foreignness is overtly sexualised. Bushells effectively reconfigures the tantalisingly taboo into a product that can be respectably incorporated into the suburban milieu. The Bushells consumer can thus enjoy the best of both worlds. She can rest assured that the tea she serves her guests is comparable to the tea served in New York. The product's quality alone deserves a few extra pence—not to mention her husband's approval. At the same time, she could also enjoy the enduring aura of a seductive “dark” land and the sensual mystique of its people in the comfort of her own home.

Bushells' depiction of Ceylonese workers as both obedient and sensual was far from atypical. Between the 1890s and the 1920s, Lipton's, one of the leading tea brands in the United Kingdom, had used a similar montage to advertise its tea—from the serenity and order of idyllic plantations, to the eroticised servility of Ceylonese women. Anandi Ramamurthy contends that this approach satisfied a range of interests. First, the only country to export tea before 1838 was China. Indeed, until the 1880s, 84 per cent of tea exports still came from China.²¹ With the growth of tea cultivation in India and Ceylon, there emerged a new need to combat the commercial and associative advantages that China enjoyed. Organisations such as the Planters' Association of Ceylon and the Indian Tea Association therefore sought to foreground their products' country of origin. As Ramamurthy writes:

[T]he image that was constructed was therefore in tune with what the planters wanted to see—a place of rich natural resources, but to a degree wild and therefore productively tamed through European intervention.²²

It was, in other words, a picture of imperial triumph—and consumers appeared to be eager to lap it up. By 1900, only 10 per cent of the tea consumed in Britain was imported from China, while 50 per cent came from India and 33 per cent from Ceylon.²³

²¹ Dan M. Etherington and Keith Forster, *Green Gold: The Political Economy of China's Post-1949 Tea Industry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25.

²² Anandi Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 98–9.

²³ Lizzie Collingham, *Curry: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005), 194.