

## The Colonial Beer Drinker\*

John Gunn

Old billy tea awhile may charm  
And satisfy — in spots  
But I would crave the liquid barm  
They sell in pewter pots. ('Dryblower', 1908)

One trouble when ordering a beer in Australia is shared with other countries — you have to remember what amount you want, where you are at the time, and the local popular name or one according to the capacity of the glass. Even a 'glass' can be a specific measure — 200 ml. in Western Australia and Victoria but 225 in Queensland. The now uncommon pint is 575 ml. in New South Wales but 425 in South Australia. Some of the many names for large beers such as *cruiser*, *dreadnought*, *silo*, and *Trickett* (after a champion sculler) enjoyed limited or local use, while others established a place in history: *long sleever* was popular for many decades after the 1870s, less so *deep sinker* and *Bishop Barker* (he was 6'5" tall). During World War II an approximate pint was a cut down beer bottle which gloried in the name of *Lady Blamey*, honouring the wife of the C.I.C. Like the English 'dead men', empty bottles have been *dead marines* for over a century, perhaps via 'dead mariner' or, as Grose suggested, an expression of sailors' contempt for the seamanship of marines. *Marine*, hence *mariner*, *marine dealing*, and *marining* have been used in a formal way in connection with the bottle-o trade.

The *schooner* of 425 ml. is now the main large drink in New South Wales and the Northern Territory, but it only holds 285 ml. in South Australia. There has also been rare use of *Yankee schooner* (suggesting its source), *Botany schooner*, a vague association with the Sydney suburb, and *black schooner*, the drink permitted in the coalfields before one cleans up after a shift. In the medium measures we have the *pot* of 285 ml. in Victoria, Tasmania, and Queensland, but in Western Australia it is a pint-sized 575 ml.. New South Wales and Western Australia middies are 285 ml., and one might hear 'one up one down' as an order for a schooner and a middy in some areas. The home of the 200 ml. *butcher*, once about schooner size, is South Australia, and the Northern Territory still calls the 285 ml. glass a *handle*. A *small (beer)* is 170 ml. in Victoria, 140 in Queensland, and 115 in Tasmania. In

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\*Out of deference to a very fine 'Pommy' mate I admit at the outset that the terminology of this essay, and most others like it, illustrates both Australian creativeness and an ability to use and abuse British English. It is part of a longer study which also includes hard liquor and a much sadder side of early Australian drinking.

New South Wales and South Australia the 140 ml. beer is a *pony* and the smaller 115 ml. version in Western Australia is, appropriately, a *Shetland pony*. The now rare *lady's waist* for a pony has faded, perhaps as the slender, bowed glass was replaced. In many places beers are ordered by numbers representing pre-metric ounce quantities, hence *seven* and *ten* in New South Wales and the *six*, *eight*, or *ten* in Tasmania.

All very confusing but, whatever its size or name, do not pick up a *float*, someone's unfinished drink from the bar. Also, smile when you choose to describe a short measure as *cut throat*, complain about the large *Mick Kelly collar* of froth or, if really game, stick a bow-tie made from cigarette paper to the side of the glass.

Regular 26 ounce (750 ml.) bottles seem to have had little variation in naming, although I have heard of *black shirt* and *rabbit* in the Northern Territory. To 'run the rabbit' was once the method of fetching beer from the pub in a billy-can, and 'run the cutter' described passing a billy of beer round a group of drinkers. Today smaller containers are popular, hence the well known *tinny* and *tube* for 375 ml. cans. Half bottles of 375 ml. are *stubbies*, rarely *stumpies*, *brownies*, or the puzzling *glass cans*. Other small local or imported bottles vary from 250 to 350 ml. in capacity; in Queensland the 250 is a *throwdown*, not in the littering sense but being easily drunk at a gulp. We must not forget the 2,000 ml. *Darwin stubby* for big drinkers, or that a beer drinker in transit is undressed without his *esky* (the first trade name for an insulated box) or *chilly bin*.

Types of beer are usually requested by the brewer's name, although I have heard of *dirty Annie* for what was D.A. or dinner ale. Just after World War II there was *Richmond tiger* (stop drinking when the tiger leaps off the label), also *Mudgee mud*, a hurried brew made in Mudgee during the pre-war beer shortage and of significance because this writer married a grand-daughter of the founder. Today one often has to name his beer type, 'new' or 'old', the latter being darker and brewed on the bottom. We only occasionally hear of a mix of the two being called a *fifty* (previously *half and half*), or 'one each way' as an order of one of each. The mix of beer and lemonade has always been the English *shandy(gaff)*, and a *port o'gaff* is a stout and lemonade. We now have the choice of full and low alcohol beers, and names of these, such as *super* and *standard*, are becoming established.

Apart from worn out terms like *amber*, beer has enjoyed a large number of usually short-lived names. World drinkers could add many more to a list like *drain*, *gargle*, *lotion*, *piss* (hence *piss up*, *hit the piss*, *on the piss*, etc.), *sherbert*, *singing syrup*, *squirt*, *turps*. In colonial times there was *small beer* (inferior and weak) and a *sugar beer*, sometimes over-sweetened by adding raw sugar. Aborigines made a kind of sugar beer known as *bull* by soaking pieces of sugar bag, a variation of

'bulling' a spirit cask with water. Intoxication could have been partly induced by an additive, but there might also have been some toxic substance in the sugar bag itself.

A brew known as *colonial (beer/ale)* was available from the early nineteenth century. It was also called *jerrawicke* for a short time in the 1850s and, towards the end of the century, *stringy(bark)*, a name also given to a rather awful, bush-distilled whisky. There were occasional terms like *shearer's joy*, and during this period *she-oak*, rarely *shee* or *sheroka*, was a common name for colonial beer. It must have been quite powerful if *she-oak* nets had to be slung under gangways to catch sailors returning to their ships. The name could have something to do with casks made from the native oak tree, or its potency might have been compared with that of she-oak 'rum', a bush concoction. As well-known as she-oak was *shypoo* for inferior liquor, frequently beer, from which we had the shortening *shie*, also used as a name for tea; compounds included *shypoo-jerker* (barmaid), *shypoo-shark* (bar bum), and *shypoo shop* (*shanty* or a *sly-grog* establishment).

Conscientious drinkers of any liquor seem to develop a raging thirst very quickly, occasionally called, in historical order 'dry as a lime-burner's boot', 'skin cracking for a grog' or 'fanging for a drink'. Their earlier English names in Australia like *bibber*, *tooper*, *tippler* seem politely good-humoured, certainly more easy-going than *Lush(ington)* that also embraces 'Alderman' and 'Lady' L. Much more casual have been expressions like *alkie*, *beer eater*, *boozehead*, *boozer*, *gargler*, *grog artist*, *hic*, *hophead*, *pisspot*, *shicker*, *shickster*, *sink*, and *soaker*. For variation there is the quick drunk or *two-pot screamer* and he who drinks with the flies, the *Johnny Woodser* (sometimes connoting stinginess to those in a 'shouting' school), this name also being given to his drink.

Drinking to excess has surely generated its share of terms, many also going back to English and other colonial origins. A soaker with the *drink fever* would have been indulging in the *drain traffic* if in the habit of *knocking down* or *drinking out* his cheque at a wayside pub or shanty. After this he would probably *take water*, that is, leave after going broke. He would have been *wet in his clay* or, more likely, going on a *bender*, *blowout*, *break-out*, *bust*, *burst*, *the scoot*, *the swill*, a *shivoo*, *the turps*, *the spree* (hence *spreer*, *spreeing*) described by the *Braidwood News* (23 April 1862, p. 3) as 'thunder and lightning and heavy wet'. The twentieth century has seen similar shared expressions come and go; for example, a *bash*, *beano*, *binge*, *boatrace*, *grogup*, *jag*, *piss up*, *session*, as men *hit the grog* (also *hit it* or *oneself*), *get on the herbs*, *jump their horses over the bar* (sell a horse for drinking money), or do a little *beer sparring*. Marcus Clarke used 'moisten and chaffer', perhaps a nonce phrase similar to 'taking out the horse' for going out to the pub. We have come through lots of expressions like *stopping one*, *having a wet*,

*knocking down (or back) a few, cracking a bottle, giving it a bash/belt/lash/nudge, etc.* and, to be up with the times, *bugling a can (tinnie)*.

Names like the above could also have been associated with hard drinking of rum, other spirits, or poisonous concoctions of *sly grog-sellers* and *shanty-keepers*. It is the poor sufferers at their hands who endured the *jim-jams, jumps, the bush* (or *dry*) *horrors*, fairly common names for the D.T.s since late in the last century. And no wonder when one reads of additives for flavour or a 'kick' from friars balsam, painkiller, sheepwash tobacco, white spirit (metho), turpentine, or kerosene, probably 'smoothed' with Worcestershire sauce, ginger, or sugar. That is another story, and beer drinkers have usually managed to avoid such a fate, except for a possibly shortened life and a *beer gut* (or *brewer's goitre*) for their trouble. It is not surprising that there are very few happy nicknames for mine host, frequently not a very popular person. The formal 'publican' has enjoyed the greatest currency, although *bung* was common in colonial days. *Jumper*, probably a nonce word, has also been used. Whatever name he is given, drinkers might still cynically say that they have 'struck oil' when the publican buys a round.

The state of intoxication has always attracted more than its share of ephemeral, quasi-synonyms that reflect a world wide practice. From the nineteenth century we have *all overish, cumfoozled, fresh, gone in the wind, groggy, half-cocked, half seas over, housing one's jib, inked, lushy, moppy, mops and brooms, muddy, muzzy, nippered, pot valiant, a shade over slightly, sewed up, shack(er)(ed), snuffy, spoony, tight, tipsy*. Not to be outdone, the twentieth century has added more, such as *blithered, blotto, canned, drunk as Chloe, flaked, having the Fogarty award, full, gone to Gowings, inpissated, lathered, mechanized, molo, oiled, one over the six, slewed, sozzled, squiffy, stonkered, stung, stunned, tanked, under the weather, untidy*.

Whether one reaches the above condition more easily through being a loner or a social drinker is a moot question. Certainly there has been more belief in social drinking these days and this raises the matter of payment procedures. In earlier times it was sometimes decided by a toss or ballot, with variations from place to place. Two Queensland methods were *pongello* (throwing dice) or the *Tambaroora muster*, each person putting in a shilling or so, and a shake of the dice deciding the winner who buys the drinks and keeps the change. In the latter method one could pay above the price for each drink or end up in front on winning a muster or two. Guessing games like 'hiding the horse' or 'fingering' could decide the loser, who then pays.

The mateship of group drinking, unless well organized, has encouraged the practice of *shouting*; during the first half of the nineteenth century a person shouting might call 'nobblers round' or, more rarely, be said to *stand Sam* or *stand flat*. To

say 'my shout' or be the *captain* or *in the chair*, does not make one a good fellow unless it is above and beyond the call of taking one's turn. It is usually bad form to leave a group of shouters before one's turn, so drinkers wanting to leave occasionally 'buy themselves out' by shouting early. The term 'shout' has been related to the call for drinks, but the phrase 'stand shot', which goes back to the fifteenth century, might also explain the origin.

I have heard of a non-shouter, who lets others buy, being referred to as a *whisper* or a *joiner*, also as having 'a snake in his pocket' or 'deep pockets and short arms'. More direct are words like *bot*, *bummer*, *hum*, and *humming bee*. A joiner, who buys his own drink can be described as *single sticking*, not to be confused with a *Johnny Woodser*, who drinks alone. When each member of the group pays for his own drink it becomes a *Yankee Shout*.

Whatever the pitfalls of Australian beer drinking, I trust that you avoid the fate of one who wailed, 'If I stick to beer I git full before I'm shick, an', if I stick to gin I'm shick before I'm full' (*The Bulletin*, 31 January 1913, p. 2). A ghastly situation for the unstructured drinker, unlike another who had his priorities and was well described in the *Native Companion Songster* (1889, p. 5),

And as for liquor - bless his chump!  
He can suck it like a pump,  
And he's rosy with the girls upon the sly.