

The Teapot Invasion:

How the Robur Tea Company commercialised Melbourne's Walls.

Stefan Schutt



High on the wall of an old building on Lygon Street in Brunswick East is a large painted 'ghost sign' for the Robur Tea Company. Commissioned around 1929-1930, the teapot bearing the Robur name is possibly the last surviving trace of one the most concerted and multifaceted marketing campaigns of its time. During the interwar period, hundreds, possibly even thousands, of Robur teapots were painted on walls and hoardings across Australian cities. The scale of the campaign came to light in 2012 when the records of former signwriting company Lewis & Skinner were rescued from a demolition site in Melbourne's inner west. One document from this collection details the painting of over 500 such teapots throughout metropolitan Melbourne in 1929 and 1930 alone.¹ Had the Lewis and Skinner signwriting documents ended up in landfill, we may have not known that this lonely 'ghost sign' was part of an early multifaceted marketing strategy of interest to researchers in design and commercial history.

Robur's painted teapots offer an important perspective into the past. They can teach us about the growing importance of coordinated marketing campaigns that incorporated large-scale outdoor advertising.² Additionally, they offer revealing insights into Australia's broader cultural history, notably ideas of Australian identity during a time of fundamental change. Purveyors of consumer products depend on their ability to gauge and respond to social change. Marketing campaigns therefore offer something of a cultural barometer of larger events (such as war and economic depression) as well as subtle changes in cultural and societal perspectives and trends. Susie Khamis describes this as 'the cultural logic of branding'.³

This article focuses on Melbourne as a locus of the 'teapot' campaign with a view to understanding Robur's marketing activities more generally. While the focus on Melbourne is ostensibly informed by the discovery of the Lewis and Skinner records, it also reflects Melbourne's status as Australia's premier tea distribution and consumption hub during the colonial era, and the fact that Robur's headquarters were located in the Victorian capital. However, Robur undertook elaborate marketing strategies in other states too, including its interwar 'teapot' campaign. The Robur Tea Company was one of the few late-nineteenth century tea brands (of which there were many) that developed into household icons. An evolving roster of marketing techniques cemented Robur in the popular imagination as a solid choice for lower middle-class consumers, who were thrifty but cared about quality. These techniques included the integrated use of commercial art, catalogues, coupons, and the production and distribution of its own teapots, and,

a little later, gimmickry such as the use of live elephants. The consumer narratives woven by Robur are compared here with those undertaken by Bushells, a competitor in the tea market.⁴ Both brands were connected with the emergence of a new urban middle class in late Victorian and Edwardian Australia, following the gold rush and its influx of wealth. From the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the two competitors adopted a range of marketing strategies. At times they copied one another; at other times, their respective strategies diverged. By examining the Robur campaigns and their relationship with Bushells, this article not only revisits the forgotten story of a significant national brand, it also reiterates the multifaceted contribution that commercial art has made to Australia's cultural and material heritage.

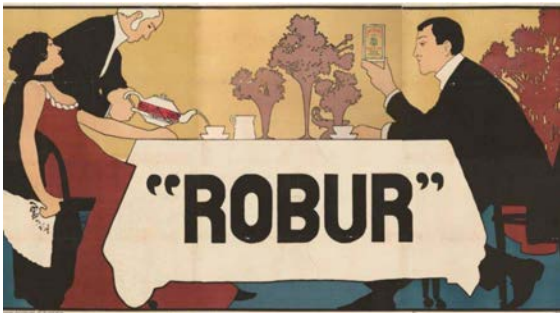
A Continent of Tea Drinkers

Tea has been central to Australian life since colonisation.⁵ Indeed, the consumption and trading of tea, like tobacco, was long associated with the British Empire.⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century, Australians were drinking the most tea per capita in the world: an estimated four to five kilograms per week.⁷ Despite the traditional image of the outback pioneer, nearly two-thirds of Australians were living in cities or towns by 1891: a proportion greater than the United States or Canada.⁸ With this new urban middle class came a nascent consumer culture. This development prompted Donald Horne to muse in *The Lucky Country* that Australia was one of the earliest countries 'to find the meaning of life in the purchase of consumer goods'.⁹

The Victorian gold rush from the early 1850s to late 1860s briefly elevated Melbourne to the status of the world's

Above and Inset
Robur Tea ghost sign,
Lygon Street, Brunswick
East, 2017, photographer:
Stefan Schutt

Previous Spread
*Victorian Railways, Active
Service on the Industrial
Front – Munitions Trainees
Wanted!* (1938), poster,
Gift of the Victorian
Railways 1981, courtesy
of the State Library of
Victoria



This Page
New Seasons Robur Tea, polychrome billboard poster designed by Blamire Young, 1899, courtesy National Archives of Australia

Opposite
Russell Brothers Grocers, Elephant tea party, 1939, courtesy State Library of NSW

wealthiest city.¹⁰ It also saw the Victorian population explode from 77,000 people in 1851 to 411,000 only six years later.¹¹ Melbourne's built environment consequently underwent rapid development with elegant streets sporting well-appointed shops catering for a growing and newly affluent population. Such conditions would have an impact on the city's consumption patterns. Peter Griggs notes that by the late nineteenth century, nearly a third of the tea imported into Australia was drunk by Victorians.¹² This concentration of consumers and wealth also helped establish Melbourne as Australia's principal tea importation and distribution hub. Scores of tea importers, merchants and auctioneers made their living in the southern port in the 1860s and 1870s, followed by a second wave in the 1880s and early 1890s.

The Emergence of the Robur Brand

It was in this vibrant and competitive environment of the 1880s and 1890s that the Robur brand emerged. The word Robur is Latin for vitality or, variously, 'strong as an ox'. An alcoholic concoction called "Robur tea spirit" had been advertised as a health tonic in newspapers during the 1870s,¹³ but 'Robur' was soon used to brand actual tea. As competition for consumers intensified, Robur, like the Oriental Tea Company, Griffith's and Bushells, developed innovative promotional strategies. These were buoyed by new packaging technologies, the rise of the department store, and the increasing gap between the production of commodities and their purchase and consumption.¹⁴ Consumables were increasingly sold remotely in tins, jars and bottles with attractive labels, and no longer in paper bags from knowledgeable grocers. Griggs tells of tea marketers producing colour lithographs, full-page newspaper advertisements, elaborate packages and even a 25-foot high glass display case with a griffin on the top.¹⁵

Melbourne's rapidly growing wealth came to a sudden halt in the 1890s. An economic collapse resulted from a speculative and unsustainable property and infrastructure boom.¹⁶ Although the financial crises peaked in 1893, the ongoing fallout was severe and protracted. As a low-cost staple and a source of everyday comfort, tea, however, continued to sell through the decade. Of the brands of packet and tinned tea, Robur soon became Melbourne's most promoted.¹⁷ First marketed by Melbourne tea merchants and importers Hawthorn, Rhodes & Company,¹⁸ advertisements for this 'celebrated brand' began to appear in newspapers from 1890. Advertisements initially focused on the product's quality and purity, playing on consumers' negative past experiences with some teas, as well as contemporary quality

issues with industrial food production methods.¹⁹ Robur would reprise this theme repeatedly over the following decades. Consumption of Robur Tea by Melburnians grew through the decade, which also saw a number of new players enter the market - including Brisbane's ambitious Bushells company.

Early Robur promotions periodically included appeals to 'glamour, prestige and progress'²⁰ such as, the recently discovered and restored Robur poster created by William Blamire Young (better known for his watercolour art works and art criticism than his commercial art work). In 1899, Young presented two large, modern-looking poster designs to Robur's advertising manager, who ordered a thousand copies to be printed.²¹ One depicts two well-to-do, relaxed-looking urban socialites being served Robur Tea by a waiter in a restaurant.

The James Service Years

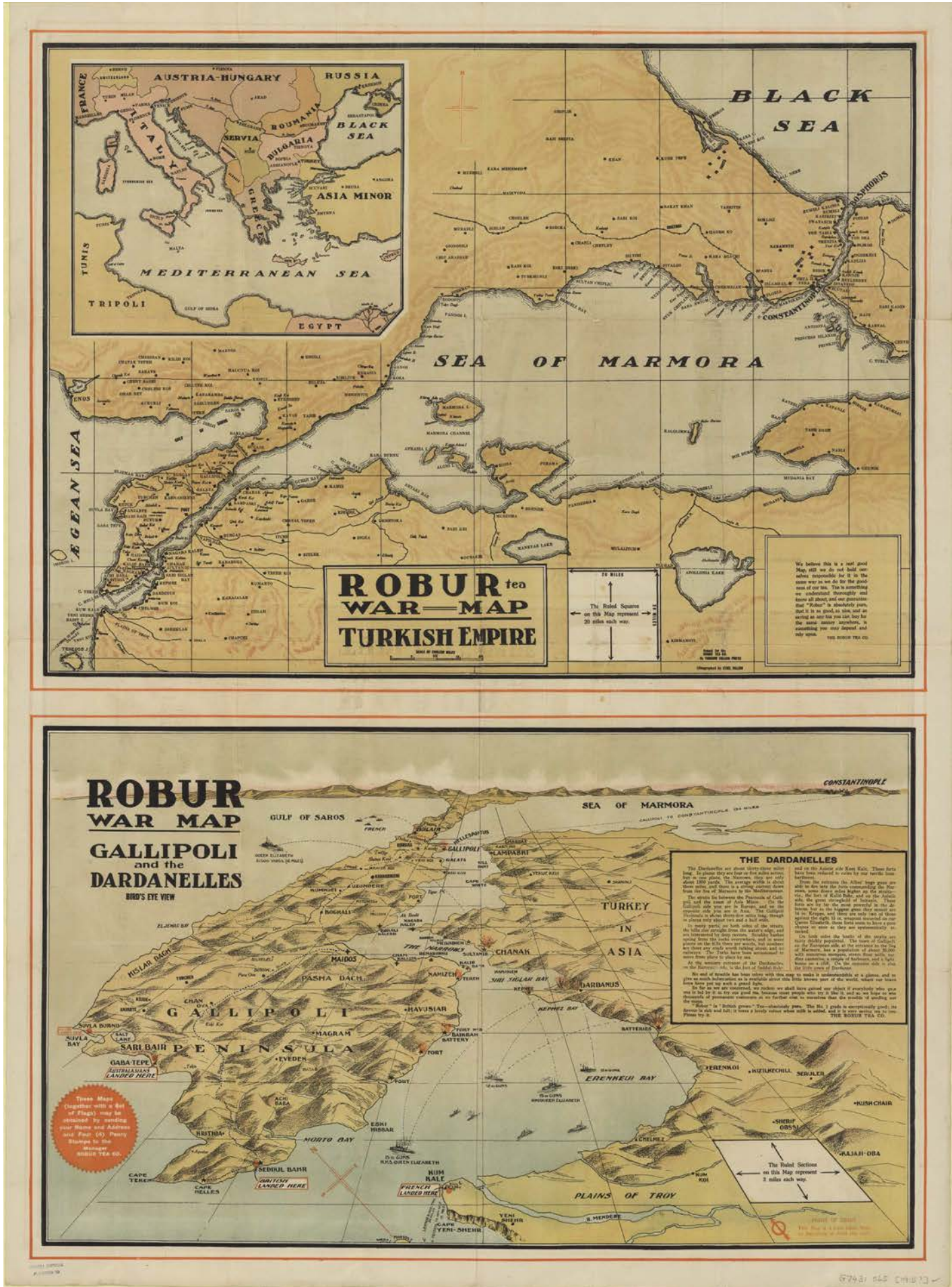
In 1900, the Robur brand was acquired by James Service & Company, one of Melbourne's larger tea importers and shipping agents. The company's Scottish-born namesake and founder had been a prominent tea importer and businessman, then a pugnacious and controversial political reformer who had gone on to become the Treasurer and Premier of Victoria in the 1880s. Service's father, who had also emigrated to Australia, was a long-term activist in the temperance movement, which gained popularity in Australia during the 1870s and 1880s. As Griggs points out, this movement was a further factor in the growing consumption of tea in the Australian colonies. It indicated a shift in societal values to the ideal of a hard-working, sober and devout population and was attended by a growth in nonconformist but family-oriented Christian faiths.²²

James Service died a year before the acquisition of Robur. The company was then taken over by Service's business partner, Randal James Alcock. Alcock was another big personality, a successful merchant and colonial identity. Under Alcock's direction, James Service & Co now specialised in producing and marketing Robur Tea, and acted as agents for a range of other companies.²³

Robur's new owners advertised aggressively and sales continued to grow.²⁴ Victorian newspapers were swamped with advertisements. Robur's marketing continued to use pastoral images by well-known Australian artists. Susie Khamis notes that the banking and property collapse of the 1890s had led to a heightened awareness of the rural sector and its contribution to the fragile prosperity of the new nation.²⁵ This awareness was demonstrated by the popularity of the *Bulletin* magazine and the stories of shearers, farmers and swagmen written by contributors like Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson. Efforts to harness the appeal of the bush in the late Victorian era were widespread, as can be seen in brand names such as Camp Tea, Pannikin Blend, Swagman Blend, Coe-ee and Billy Tea.²⁶

At the same time the developing middle class, and the less financially and culturally secure 'lower' middle class, were keen to demonstrate their respectability and status.²⁷ As tea was a relatively inexpensive product consumed by all classes, tea marketers recognised an opportunity to imbue





Robur in the Interwar Period

From 1918, Alcock became Robur's sole proprietor. It was around this time that the teapot motif began to appear regularly in Robur's advertising. Tea was still the young nation's most favoured non-alcoholic drink in Sydney as well as Melbourne.³² Australians would retain the title of the world's biggest tea drinkers until the great Depression, when they were out-drunk by their British cousins.³⁴

Following the travails of the First World War, the 1920s saw renewed social and economic confidence in Melbourne, albeit at more subdued levels than previously. One of the lingering effects of the 1890s downturn was pervasive and entrenched pockets of poverty. This contrasted with the impacts of modernity including the widespread introduction of electricity, mass-produced cars, and the ideal of suburban living. Advertising played an active role in developing consumer desires for these modern ideas, incorporating increasingly sophisticated emotive strategies on the one hand and acting as a guide for people unnerved by the increased pace and changing nature of modern living on the other.³⁵ As the keepers of household budgets, women were identified as an essential target of advertisers as well as the commercial media – women's magazines proliferated while radio provided a new source of entertainment and information.

Bushells re-entered the burgeoning Melbourne market in 1922, having exited it in 1904.³⁶ Competition would be fierce: tea was still a lucrative business. The themes of the new era were adopted with enthusiasm by Bushells. Seeking to convey an image that appealed to the new suburban middle class, Bushells presented itself as traditional and 'sophisticated, discerning and modern'. Advertisements featured immaculately groomed women, opulent surroundings, and the use of exoticised but servile representations of women from India and Ceylon. Such imagery also fed into the narrative of identification with an enduring Empire that by then was in decline.³⁷

As the jostle for market share intensified, attention-grabbing promotions were instigated. In 1924 Bushells gave away a half pound of free tea to every Sydney home.³⁸ Robur sought to incorporate elements of tradition with modernity via innovative marketing strategies, albeit in a different manner to Bushells. Robur focused on thrift and value, incorporating the central motif of the woman as the keeper of the home. It spoke to a less status-conscious kind of audience than Bushells, even as it cherry-picked some of its aspirational elements. The teapot as symbol of homely comforts gained traction during this time before becoming the core of an integrated advertising and marketing campaign. By 1928, the Robur Tea Company was the most prominent and profitable of James Service & Company's businesses. It was incorporated in its own right, took over the other James Service tea businesses, and turned to more innovative forms of marketing.³⁹

One of Robur's key appeals relied on new silverware manufacturing technologies. Recently developed nickel-silver electroplating techniques allowed for the production of household goods that were relatively inexpensive yet retained the sheen of silver. This resulted in 'the golden era for the production of domestic silverware in Australia'.⁴⁰

This page
 "Robur" Queen of Tea: advertisement for Robur Tea, South Brisbane, Queensland, 1907, courtesy National Library of Australia.

Opposite
 Robur Tea war map, Gallipoli and the Dardanelles: bird's eye view / issued for the Robur Tea Co. by Farrow Falcon Press; lithographed by Cyril Dillon, courtesy National Library of Australia

their product with a respectability that was accessible and instant. Robur thus used art as an aspirational form of appeal to high culture and refinement. From 1903, the company published yearly calendars with illustrations featuring artworks in public galleries. These were available for free from local grocers. Brand awareness grew; by 1905, despite a downturn in national tea consumption, Robur's Melbourne operation employed some 120 workers.²⁸ In 1906 the company's ongoing success enabled it to move to a large red-brick warehouse that dominated Clarendon Street near the Yarra docks. The building, still known as the Tea House, would be Robur's home until the mid-1970s.²⁹ Other promotional devices appealed to people in a variety of working-class professions, such as the 'Robur Tea girl', the 'Robur Queen of Tea' and the provision of brewing advice. These tactics played a key role in personalising the Robur brand at a time where the specialist advice of the local grocer was beginning to fade.

Like other entrepreneurial marketers of consumables such as sweets mogul Macpherson Robertson,³⁰ Robur found an opportunity to capitalise on the First World War. Its wartime advertisements encouraged Australian women to send Robur Tea to their menfolk at the front. James Alcock was also behind a campaign to align Robur Tea with the war effort by publishing war maps, including a 1915 map of Gallipoli and the Dardanelles campaign. The map could be bought from Robur for 4d (including postage).³¹ There was no hesitation in aligning significant world events to opportunities to promote ones' products to a population hungry for news about the war. Robur was by no means alone in doing this.³²

The mix of perceived quality and value suited Robur’s market. The firm soon set up its own teapot manufacturing arm at its Tea House building, the Challenge Silverware division. Challenge’s first product was the Perfect Teapot, produced from 1927 from electroplated nickel silver (EPNS) and reproduction Sheffield plate. Patented worldwide, the teapot design was a huge success.⁴¹ It also led to the development of a range of other silverware products and was still being made in 2002.⁴² This is the teapot that can be seen print advertisements from this time.

The second key marketing tool deployed by Robur was painted outdoor advertising, which hit its peak in the 1920s and lasted until the 1950s when cheaper, mass-produced poster formats began to erode its dominance.⁴³ Advertising signs had been painted on walls and hoardings in an ad-hoc manner since early colonial days, but the post-First World War period saw small operators mature into companies capable of organising large-scale campaigns. Automobiles enabled sign painters to move more easily from location to location, and sign painting companies developed advertising rental arrangements with owners of buildings with highly visible walls.⁴⁴ Despite the growth of the car, the locus of most people’s shopping was still local strip shops within walking distance of home. Wall spaces in these strips were at a premium for advertisers. Significantly, many of the strips that were active from the 1920s to the 1940s still carry the remains of these signs, which have subsequently become community markers and points of identity.⁴⁵

The production of the Perfect Teapot in the booming late 1920s heralded a wide-ranging, national marketing campaign that brought together these elements in a coordinated manner. In Melbourne and other urban centres, Robur teapots were painted on shops, walls and hoardings. The Lewis & Skinner records contain a hand-written book outlining the location of Robur teapots painted from January 1929 to June 1930. Over this eighteen-month period, 541 teapot signs were painted throughout Melbourne and regional Victoria.⁴⁶ Teapots also graced posters plastered on railway station platforms, on the sides of roads and elsewhere. Whereas signwriters painted the teapots directly onto walls and windows, posters were designed by commercial artists. Cyril Dillon thus produced the advertisement which features the Perfect Teapot while emphasising both the domestic charms of the brand as well as its economy.

The Depression and Aftermath

Following the US stock market crash of 24 October 1929, Australia sank deeper into depression. The Robur Tea Company, which was in the process of being taken over by the South Australian food importer and manufacturer DJ Fowler,⁴⁷ suddenly faced a straitened economic landscape. It needed to revisit its marketing strategies if it was to retain market share.

One of Robur’s key Depression-era initiatives was the ‘profit-sharing catalogue’. The idea of ‘profit sharing’ had originally referred to schemes, originating in the nineteenth century, which allowed employees to share some of their employers’ profits. The term then found its way into American retail catalogues, with customers presented as ‘sharers’ of profit. Goods-promoting catalogues had first

been used in Australia in the 1860s. From the late 1880s these catalogues became popular with rural and regional Australians, who were growing in affluence and were keen to buy into the lifestyle improvements that their urban counterparts enjoyed.⁴⁸ In these catalogues, Robur argued that the company’s ability to buy in bulk allowed for economies of scale. These profits, it was claimed, were then distributed to customers in the form of vouchers or coupons for redeeming catalogue items that included not only teapots, but everything from tableware and kitchenware to aprons, beauty products, handbags, and playing cards.

Robur’s ‘profit-sharing catalogue’ also echoed broader concerns. The economic crisis had propelled a growing sense of disillusionment in capitalism. Working-class people had borne the brunt of the Depression’s privations, and in Victoria the effects of the Depression had been particularly severe. One response was the establishment of cooperative movements in working-class communities that ‘promoted co-operation for mutual benefit, rather than competition for individual gain’.⁴⁹ These ‘co-ops’ bought everyday staples in bulk, which could then be bought at reduced rates by members, thereby incorporating elements of both pragmatism and idealism.⁵⁰ This discourse amplified the appeal of Robur’s ‘profit-sharing’ catalogues.

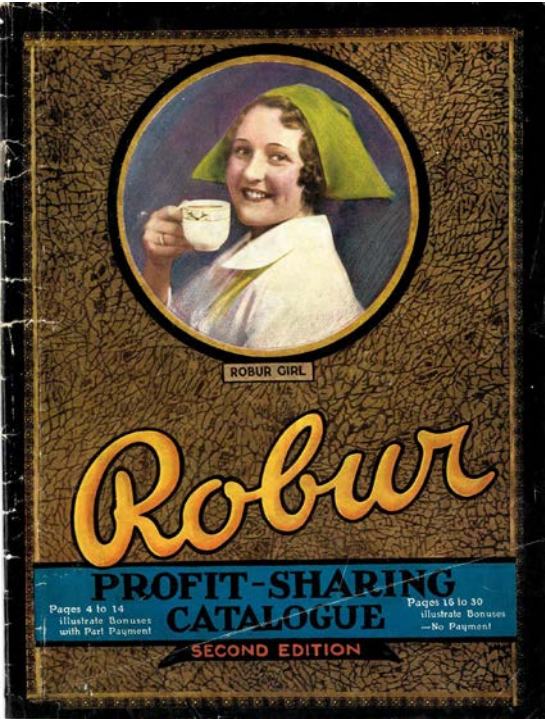
The Depression also informed other marketing initiatives. Khamis notes that the Depression years ‘summonsed a powerful discourse of thrift and frugality’ in the psyche of most Australian households, even the more affluent ones.⁵¹ This air of restraint extended beyond the worst of the Depression years. It was well suited to Robur’s marketing strategies, which had already associated the brand with such qualities. Rather than trading on notions of glamour and status, Bushells similarly opted ‘to co-opt the concept of judicious consumption’,⁵² connecting the notion of quality increasingly to value, and transforming ‘its leisured lady of the 1920s, the glamorous patron of hotels and matinees, into a paragon of household competence’.⁵³ This theme continued throughout the 1930s. Advertisements sporting the trappings and accessories of the upwardly-mobile middle class were replaced by ‘a no-frills minimalism that culled everything except for a single box of Bushells tea, and multiples of white ceramic tea cups’.⁵⁴ In 1933 Bushells followed Robur and instigated a catalogue-based rewards system for loyal consumers. However, a subtle difference in language reveals its more status-conscious clientele: Bushells framed its catalogue offerings as ‘gifts’ rather than as anything related to the products of corporate wealth redistribution.

Robur’s long-standing focus on thrift enabled it to adapt to the new economic circumstances. The profit-sharing catalogues continued through the 1930s, with a ninth issue published as late as 1950. As the effects of the Depression waned and confidence picked up, Robur’s marketing campaigns pivoted into more exotic approaches. Instead of conveying Bushells’ status-laden sense of glamour and privilege, Robur took a populist approach. It commissioned the painting of scores of new signs, including the painting of the word “Robur” on entire large roof surfaces (one of these still exists in Brunswick, Melbourne). It also generated marketing devices such as an ‘animal book’ for children, the



THE ROSE SERIES P. 3386
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CHAPEL STREET, WINDSOR, VIC.



SECTION 1—Silverware for Tickets and Part Payment.



Ref. No. 109. Squat Shape. Ref. No. 110. Tall Shape.
Tray Ref. No. 111.

Sugar Bowls and Tray

STERLING SILVER ON NICKEL SILVER PLATE.

	3-Gill Size Either Shape	5-Gill Size Either Shape	Tray Size 17 1/2 x 12 1/2 in.
Cash Price, without tickets	20/6	27/6	53/-
Price when sending with payment tickets from Robur Tea packages representing 12 lbs.	14/-	20/-	35/6
Price when sending with payment tickets from Robur Tea packages representing	80 lbs. 6/-	120 lbs. 8/-	200 lbs. 15/6

Above prices include 2/- for packing and delivery. This can be saved by taking delivery at our warehouse or showrooms.

With any article purchased without tickets we give an undertaking to refund the difference between the full price and the price paid by those having tickets from 12 lbs. of Robur Tea, provided we receive these tickets collected from Robur packages within six months from date of purchase. After that the buyer may collect the required balance of tickets any time within five years and an allowance will be made for them to reduce the price to that paid when having the full number of tickets.

In order that purchasers of articles of Silverware in Section 1 shall not have to wait until the whole of the necessary tickets are collected to obtain their full refund, we give with each purchase a certificate to which are attached coupons, and for each of these coupons we will pay 2/- when they are accompanied by tickets representing 24 lbs. of Robur Tea.

By making a deposit of 2/6 any article of Silverware in Section 1 can be reserved by you, and we will issue a certificate to supply it at any time within five years at the price and conditions ruling at time the deposit is paid. Otherwise we maintain the right to alter prices and conditions at any time.

When Ordering Simply State Reference Number and Size of Article.

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sponsoring of scooter races, and the 1934 packaging and selling for charity (with Robur Tea promotions inside) of pieces of the “Centenary Souvenir Birthday Cake”, which, at fifty feet high, claimed to be the largest cake ever made. The high point of Robur’s golden era of marketing stunts occurred in 1939, when Robur borrowed an elephant from Wirth’s Circus to visit its retail tea rooms for a ‘tea party’. Such follies came to an end with the Second World War. Coupon-based tea rationing was imposed during the war

(and remained in place long after hostilities ceased), as the tea supply chains of the British Empire were disrupted and eliminated. People remained hooked on tea, complaining to parliament and the Prime Minister about the restrictions. Tea theft soared – there was even a riot in wartime Melbourne when a Bushells Tea truck overturned, and people rushed in to grab what tea they could.⁵⁵ Rationing played a role in reducing Australians’ future thirst for tea. By the early 1950s, Australia had slipped to fourth in its per-capita

tea consumption.⁵⁶ The downturn, however, did not prevent tea companies from continuing to slog it out on neighbourhood fascias and walls.

Other changes eroded tea consumption further, as well as the types of advertising driving it. A key shift was the rise of coffee, which had been popularised by the wartime influx of coffee-drinking American servicemen and the post-war wave of migration from continental Europe.⁵⁷ The concurrent rise in car ownership also enabled consumers to drive to supermarkets to do their shopping. Such developments, coupled with the advent of television in 1956, saw a decreased emphasis on local advertising. In this changing climate, Robur’s teapot signs were left to fade. Those who had been responsible for producing the signs for Robur would also experience fundamental change. The shift away from local advertising points would have a significant impact on the large-scale sign painting industry, which would be further impacted in the 1980s with the arrival of vinyl cutting machines.⁵⁸ With consumers abandoning tea, marketers abandoning suburban walls, and commercial signwriters abandoning their paintbrushes, advertising campaigns of the “Robur teapot” kind would become a thing of the past.

Legacies in Lead Paint

In recent years, and especially in the age of social media and camera phones, people have become increasingly fascinated with the traces of painted advertising signs, now commonly known as ‘ghost signs’. A range of reasons for this trend has been proposed including the valorisation of signwriters’ lost skills, interest in ‘retro’ design and typography, a sense of loss as urban environments change,⁵⁹ identification with the signs as unofficial local landmarks, and nostalgia for remembered brands and former ways of living.⁶⁰ A cohort of ‘ghost sign hunters’ has emerged in cities around the world: people who actively locate, photograph and post images of ghost signs to blogs, photo sharing sites and Facebook pages. A parallel recent phenomenon has been the collecting of Robur Tea paraphernalia: examples of both the Perfect teapot and the profit-sharing catalogues often sell for hundreds of dollars.

Although only one of the hundreds of painted Robur teapots appears to have survived, many other Robur signs can still be seen throughout Melbourne. They are slowly fading but they cling on, bolstered by the addition of lead to the paint which has helped it seep into the brickwork. This addition has significantly lengthened the signs’ lives – if not the lives of the lead-poisoned people who painted them.

These kinds of urban reminders can be read in numerous ways. Khamis notes that the Bushells brand of tea ‘has consistently documented major changes in Australia’s social composition, cultural tenor and economic climate’, thereby helping to ‘illustrate and narrate monumental moments in the nation’s past’.⁶¹ She further contends that Bushells managed to do this because its ‘strength was its associational pull, the various ways it convincingly lassoed broader aspirations and inclinations’.⁶² The Robur brand can claim similar status as a cultural signifier; the long-term success of both brands evidence of their success in their associational endeavours.

However, Khamis also warns that the kinds of early marketing verve and innovation exhibited by Bushells – and also by Robur – should not be seen as above, or independent of, the larger social and cultural forces that have generated them. Instead, Khamis suggests they should be seen primarily as a tactical accommodation of those forces to serve the immediate needs of the business owners.⁶³ Commerce, in the end, is a pragmatic pursuit, but the traces of the artifacts generated by it can reveal broader forces from the vantage point of the future. But one must be attuned to such resonances and layers. The evocation of purely personal pasts often described by ghost sign fans and collectors of old branded paraphernalia may be valid, but may miss other kinds of readings.⁶⁴

One such reading applies to both the Robur and Bushells brands, given their historical context and the products they advertised. This is that such brands are the unintentional signifiers of an empire in terminal decline. Sam Roberts and Sebastian Groes suggest that London’s ghost signs ‘could be construed as part of a mythology of loss that is a particularly strong current in this nation’s consciousness and literature’.⁶⁵ A similar thing could be said of the advertising artifacts generated by the tea merchants operating in the far reaches of the British Empire. They speak of an identification with a fading mythical glory at the point of its loss, a pathos made more poignant by the fading, crumbling quality of the signs.

This identification with loss, however, is ironic given what has occurred since. Citing *No Logo*, Naomi Klein’s 1999 examination of globalisation and its impacts, Roberts and Groes point out that ‘the origins of globalisation as we experience it today is a continuation of earlier forms of imperialism’.⁶⁶ The sole remaining Robur teapot on a Brunswick East wall is an unofficial reminder of that irony in its evocation of the everyday affordances of the past: *the Empire has gone, and so have I, but Empire remains*. For Roberts and Groes, London’s ghost signs ‘stress both the continuity and relationship between London’s and Britain’s economic development during the industrial revolution and late capitalism, whilst, paradoxically, the signs’ moribund status suggests a discontinuity with the past’.⁶⁷ The ghost signs produced by the Robur Tea Company provide an unexpected window into this tension and ambivalence. They are embedded in the urban fabric of the city, connecting past and present to the passer-by with a metaphorical arched eyebrow.

Like the signs around Melbourne, Robur’s name has faded but it has not entirely disappeared. In more recent times, the Robur story has taken a unique twist. The firm J. Lyons took over the much-reduced Robur Tea Company in 1992, after having already taken over two other iconic tea brands, Billy Tea and Tetley. A joint venture with the Indian tea company Tata Beverages (now a diversified manufacturing conglomerate) followed in 1993, with Tata taking over Lyons Tetley in 2000. Hence, a company from a country whose products were once exploited by the British Empire now owns a brand associated with the Empire and that same exploitation. Such are the ways of globalisation.

Opposite
Robur profit sharing catalogue: 2nd edition, Robur Tea Co. Lt d. [trade catalogue] 1931, Courtesy Sydney Living Museums, Caroline Simpson Living Libraries Collection



Top and Bottom
The fading ghostsigns of Robur, Nepean Highway 1993. Photograph: Stephen Banham



Endnotes

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19 Khamis, “Bushells and the Cultural Logic of Branding.”

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