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'A Poisonous Cup?' Afternoon Tea  
in Australian Society, 1870-1914.

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# **Abstract**

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This thesis examines the ceremonies and rituals that emerged around the taking of afternoon tea in Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Drawing on recent historiography of manners and social relationships, it explores how afternoon tea infiltrated many aspects of daily life and helped define boundaries between gender, public and private, rural and urban, work and leisure. This thesis contributes to the small body of research on tea drinking and domestic life in Australia. Its methodology combines cultural analysis with investigation of the material apparatus and tangible social locations of afternoon tea, offering unexpected insight into the tensions that surfaced as Australian society evolved into a modern nation.

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## Introduction

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“What to serve at afternoon tea?” the Australian women’s periodical *New Idea* asked in its second issue, published in 1902. Fortunately for readers, this question was readily answered. The feature article described in tantalising detail the array of ‘dainty dishes’ that a hostess might serve. Chocolate wafers. Cheese sandwiches. Almond macaroons. Even ‘ices’ if she so fancied. A wide selection of sweet and savoury delicacies were listed to choose from, the implicit suggestion being that the shrewd hostess did not merely offer her guests a few of these, but served them all; accompanied with a selection of freshly brewed tea, coffee and hot chocolate. *New Idea* also reminded their female audience that as a hostess at an afternoon tea, she had certain responsibilities. She was to pour the tea into the teacups, and choose which particular friends were to preside at either end of the table with her to hand out these teacups to the other guests. She needed to remember to offer napkins to protect her guests’ dress and gloves. She had to ensure the table was arranged attractively, remembering a vase of fresh flowers. And finally, she had to encourage her guests to mingle and ensure they enjoyed themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Like the intended prospective hostess of *New Idea*’s article, it may come as a startling realisation to learn that afternoon tea comprised of much more than a delicious selection of food. As tempting as the almond macaroons might have been, they were but one feature of the entire experience. An apparently simple question regarding afternoon tea thus revealed much more than the eating and drinking preferences of Australians at the turn of the twentieth century. It affirmed the importance of tea drinking. It recognised the need to impressively

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<sup>1</sup> *New Idea*, 1 (2), 1 September 1902, p. 97.

exhibit culinary skills. It exposed the hierarchies that existed within the social gathering. It indicated that here, presentation mattered.

This thesis is concerned with the multifaceted experience of afternoon tea as it existed between the years 1870 – 1914. Afternoon tea was a ritual closely associated with domestic life; however it was also the product of a particular expansion of commerce and modernity happening across the British world. While afternoon tea was intimately woven into the fabric of everyday life, it also responded to shifting patterns of tea consumption, social practices and urbanisation, and also taken in the tearooms of the thriving cosmopolitan spaces of the metropolis. This thesis contends that in this complexity lies its significance, that through a better understanding of the afternoon tea experience we will, in turn, more intimately understand the complex relationships between class, work and leisure, family and gender that existed within Australian society at the turn of the twentieth century.

Contemporary understandings of afternoon tea evoke an image of leisured elegance that instigates nostalgia for a bygone era. It has distinct associations with high tea, Devonshire tea and tea parties. However, different times suggest different conceptions of what the words ‘afternoon tea’ represent in terms of a meal or occasion, and these understandings have little correlation to the afternoon tea of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. High tea in this period, for instance, referred to quite a different meal. In her book on household management in Britain during this era, Mrs. Beeton provided a helpful differentiation between afternoon tea and high tea that likewise existed in Australian society. While afternoon tea primarily served a social function, high tea referred to the evening dinner in

which meat was the most prominent part.<sup>2</sup> Jane Pettigrew suggests that although high tea could be taken by all members of society as a replacement to dinner, it catered most to the needs of the working-class, as their main meal took place during the middle of the day and so this relieved workers who had returned home from shift work in the early evening.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, afternoon tea rarely involved meat as the primary focus, it existed as a distinctively different meal from lunch and dinner. Indeed, it was sometimes referred to as ‘four o’clock’ or ‘five o’clock’ which simply referred to the fact afternoon tea was dependant on the time of lunch and typically occurred three hours afterwards.<sup>4</sup> A successful afternoon tea in the late nineteenth century was described as having ‘good tea, pretty cups and saucers, fresh milk, and cream, if possible, with dainty plates of scones, cake and thin bread and butter.’ The provision of tea and such food led to the emphatic question, “what more can the mortal desire who has lunched at one o'clock and intends to dine at seven?”<sup>5</sup> However, afternoon tea was not a static experience, and cannot be bound by a single definition. It referred not only to the popularised afternoon ritual of a small meal, but to drinking a cup of tea in the afternoon, as well as a more generalised break that symbolised the cessation of work. Afternoon tea changed and evolved within a broader social and cultural history.

A broader conceptual understanding of this period has been informed by a social and cultural history of Australia.<sup>6</sup> In the pursuit of understanding tea-drinking practices during this era,

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<sup>2</sup> The 1897 edition of Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* as cited in Jane Pettigrew, *A Social History of Tea* (Great Britain: National Trust Enterprises Ltd, 2001), p. 112.

<sup>3</sup> Pettigrew, *A Social History of Tea*, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 28 November 1903, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Illustrated Sydney News*, 30 August 1888, page 25.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Cannon, *Life in the Cities* (Thomas Nelson: West Melbourne, 1975); David Denholm, *The Colonial Australians* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979); P Grimshaw, M. Lake, A. McGrath, M. Quartly, *Creating a Nation* (Ringwood: Penguin books, 1996); K.S. Inglis, *The Australian Colonists: An Exploration of Social History 1788-1870* (Melbourne University Press: Carlton, 1974); Ariana Klepac & John Thompson (eds.), *Australian Voice: Glimpses of our Pioneering Past through Diaries, Letters and Recollections from the First Fleet to the Great War* (Millers Point: Murdock Books, 2010); Linda Young, *Middle class Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America, Australia and Britain* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Richard Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of*

this thesis has been informed by research regarding tea and trade networks, and cultures around tea drinking including tearooms, across England and in other parts of the empire including India and Canada.<sup>7</sup> Discussion and interest regarding the tradition of afternoon tea itself in Australia is surprisingly limited within the literature. Therefore, in conceiving this present study, it has been necessary to first locate it within a body of research that promotes the importance of investigating and understanding both domesticity and the intricacies of colonial culture.

Beverly Kingston and Penny Russell have been particularly influential in establishing a tradition of investigation within this research area. In her research on the colonial era, Kingston places particular emphasis on understanding social interactions and rituals, and the ways in which Australians spent their time to comment on class and gender. Elsewhere, Kingston examines the impact of gendered relations on Australian culture.<sup>8</sup> She argues that with the decline of domestic service it became necessary for women to engage more in household tasks. As consequence, they were limited in the active participation they could have in the community,<sup>9</sup> thus further strengthening the masculine nature of society. Russell's work provides a discussion on the precarious nature of Melbourne's gentry and the challenges involved in asserting their superior status in a culture characterised by less clear-cut class distinctions than England. She argues that to protect the gentility, women engaged in

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*Rural Australia* (North Fremantle: Curtin University Press, 2005); Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Khamis, Susie, 'A Taste for Tea: How Tea travelled to (and through) Australian culture', *ACH: The Journal of the History of Culture in Australia* 24 (January 2006), pp. 57-79; Alan Macfarlane Alan, & Iris Macfarlane, *The empire of tea: the remarkable history of the plant that took over the world* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2004); Roy Moxham, *Tea: addiction, exploitation and empire* (New York: Carroll and Grat publishers, 2003); Jane Pettigrew, *The Tea Companion* (Victoria: Penguin books, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Beverly Kingston, *My wife, my daughter and poor Mary Ann: women and work in Australia* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> Kingston, *My wife, my daughter and poor Mary Ann*, p. 28.

a “genteel performance” to monitor and protect the balance of power.<sup>10</sup> Russell further contends that “genteel femininity held together the whole elaborate edifice of society”<sup>11</sup> and by doing so, indicates the powerful position occupied by genteel colonial women. Russell has also explored the nature of colonial manners and etiquette, conceptions of respectability, hierarchical social relationships and manoeuvring of social positioning.<sup>12</sup> By exploring the every-day lives of men and women in Australia during the colonial era, Russell was able to comment on the “grand projects of empire, civilisation, modernisation [and] social regulation”.<sup>13</sup> This thesis is situated in the research established by Kingston and Russell. These historians have demonstrated that manners matter. That is, through a study of gentility, etiquette, the gentry, and social relationships a meaningful understanding of colonial life is possible. This thesis is concerned with similar subject matter, the afternoon tea experience, and uses this as an entry into the social practices and rituals of the colonial period.

The present study seeks to investigate domestic life from its many and multilayered readings; extrapolating meaning from tangible objects and places, and using these as a microcosm for understanding broader issues. The recent work of Amanda Vickery and Kylie Mirmohamadi provide a methodological framework from which to extract information from the subject matter of sites and objects. Vickery explores the domestic realm of Georgian England and argues that “the history of the home is as much a saga of power, labour, inequality and struggle, as of sanctuary and comfort, colour and pleasure”.<sup>14</sup> Vickery establishes a tradition of using the material apparatuses to understand gender and domestic responsibility within the

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<sup>10</sup> Penny Russell, *A wish of distinction: colonial gentility and femininity* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Russell, *A wish of distinction*, p. 200

<sup>12</sup> Penny Russell, *Savage or Civilised? Manners in Colonial Australia* (University of New South Wales: Sydney, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Russell, *Savage or Civilised?*, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Amanda Vickery, *Behind closed doors: at home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 3.

household.<sup>15</sup> Through this method of enquiry she highlights how the multifaceted nature of the private realm reveals a wealth of information relating to ritual, identity and social relations. Likewise, Mirmohamadi has been influential in demonstrating how specific literary locations, like the public library and bookshops, combined with women's reading practices, can be used as a vehicle for developing an understanding of gendered space and women's relationship with the city, commerce and pleasure, and the gentility.<sup>16</sup> Vickers and Mirmohamadi are particularly relevant to this study as they transform the seemingly voiceless features of history into topics appropriate for rigorous investigation.

A study of this nature requires eliciting information from a wide range of sources. Print media, typically in the form of newspapers across the country and the women's periodical *New Idea*, have proven particularly useful in understanding the information circulating amongst the general public. Feature articles, opinion pieces, poetry, short stories and letters to the editor provide scope to chart different trends and attitudes pertaining to tea, and how it became a central aspect of social interaction in domestic life and in the public culture of tearooms

Australian literature provides a substantial body of information through autobiography and fiction. Tea-drinking and afternoon tea visits appear regularly in literature, both in passing, and as the scene of key plot developments. Particular use is made of the novels and stories by Ada Cambridge. Born in England, she moved to Australia shortly after her marriage in 1870 and began writing novels and short stories, developing a style that has been compared with Jane Austen. Using the romance genre, Cambridge explored social attitudes, the refined

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<sup>15</sup> Vickery, *Behind closed doors*, p. 119-124.

<sup>16</sup> Kylie Mirmohamadi, 'Melbourne's Sites of Reading: Putting the Colonial Woman Reader in her Place', *History Australia* 6 no.2 (2009).

woman, class and social positioning.<sup>17</sup> Although novels are not evidence of reality they nonetheless provide representations of the kind of social practices that occurred within society. As well as this, Australian etiquette manuals provide rich information relating to the ritual of tea drinking in the early twentieth century and demonstrate the entrenched nature of this occasion as an important tradition. Finally, advertisements and photographs provide tangible visual representations of afternoon tea from alternative perspectives. These various sources enable insight into the social attitudes, values and practices of Australians at the turn of the century.

In order to fully conceptualise the afternoon tea experience this thesis is divided into three chapters. In chapter one I examine the imperial framework in which Australia's relationship with the commodity of tea was located. I will then consider how it assimilated itself into the fabric of everyday life by becoming a permanent presence within society as part of the daily routine, the rural lifestyle, and people's leisure choices. In chapter two I consider how afternoon tea manifested itself in domestic life, particularly as a symbol of middle class wealth; the social conventions that existed around the ritual; and the types of food that were offered during this time and their significance. I also consider the material goods associated with afternoon tea, and the manner in which they both commented on the respectability and elegance of the ritual, and how this reinforced middle class ideals. Finally, in chapter three I explore the commercialisation of tea rooms. Tea rooms formed key markers in demonstrating the success of imperial tea trade, and highlighted the interconnected economic framework of the Empire. They also became sites identified with modernity and cosmopolitanism; provided a social space which regulated urban space to the benefit of women; and were sites of romance within the popular imagination.

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<sup>17</sup> Audrey Tate, 'Introduction', in Ada Cambridge, *The Three Miss Kings*, pp. vii-xvi.

Afternoon tea, with its traditions, rituals, and assortment of material goods, has gone largely unnoticed through Australian history. It sits unassumingly in the sidelines of the nation's story, and yet through the social, economical, political and technological changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it has remained an evolving yet constant presence. It might be largely ignored now, being so engrained in our modern sensibilities, yet it was certainly noticed during Australia's colonial period, and recognised as being of quiet importance. Through afternoon tea we find a lens through which to view and understand the drinking practices, leisure time, self-conceptualisation, and relationships within colonial Australia.

## Chapter One: The Importance of Tea

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In 1883 Richard Twopenny remarked of Australian drinking practices that ‘tea may fairly claim to be the national beverage’.<sup>18</sup> Historians have agreed with this sentiment, and have suggested that Australians were the most obsessive tea drinkers in the world.<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, for example, contends that at the turn of the twentieth century the average Australian consumed approximately four kilograms of tea annually, and makes the astonishing claim that in the year 1890, Australia outstripped all of continental Europe in how many tea chests were drunk.<sup>20</sup> Yet this manic passion did not exist within a vacuum. Rather, it was the natural consequence of empire and identification with British civilisation. This chapter will examine the imperial framework in which Australia’s relationship with tea was located. It will then consider the implications of how this relationship with tea became intrinsic to various facets of society during the colonial period and thus entered into the social existence of people’s daily lives. Australia developed its own identity in relation to tea consumption, and this will be explored with respect to the billy, masculinity and rural culture. Finally, it will consider how these developments consolidated and manifested themselves in most social engagements across the period, looking specifically at picnics. From its imperial origins, tea established its own unique place and role within the social customs and norms of daily life particular to the Australian context.

Even the most basic commodity has the potential to exemplify the interconnectedness of the identities of the individual with the nation, and by doing so reveal the extensive complexity

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Twopenny, *Town Life in Australia*, (Penguin: Victoria, 1973).

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia* (Camberwell: Viking, 2003), p. 357.

<sup>20</sup> Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon*, p. 367.

of the world.<sup>21</sup> This is particularly evident in tea. According to Michael Symmons, it was this article (as well as flour and sugar) that propagated the expansion of the British empire, and accordingly tea became a ‘tool of imperial expansion’.<sup>22</sup> It is impossible to separate an understanding of tea from the British empire. It was estimated in 1897 that 80 million cups of tea were drunk across the empire.<sup>23</sup> This was a remarkable amount of tea. Nineteenth century historian Philip Lawson stated that throughout the latter part of the century, twelve million pounds of tea was being imported to England, Scotland and Wales annually. In this way it is clear that the empire was responsible for tea’s transformation as a raw foodstuff to brewed drink, dissemination, consumption and popularity. Jane Pettigrew charted the transformation of tea from a Chinese substance to a symbol of empire. Although originating in China, it was brought as a commodity to Japan, and it was there that the rituals associated with tea drinking were developed alongside Buddhist beliefs.<sup>24</sup> She argues that while it is not clear whether it was the Dutch or Portuguese who were responsible for bringing tea to Europe, tea was firmly established in England from the 1660s where women drank it in the home and men in the coffee houses established a decade earlier. The East India Company is suggested by Susie Khamis as one of the two primary reasons for the distribution and proliferation of tea to England. Prioritising the trading of tea ‘effectively orchestrated its widespread accessibility and affordability’. Khamis argued that an immediate effect of this was that tea filtered throughout society and tea drinking became ‘regularised and ritualised’.<sup>25</sup> Although originating in exotic China, tea became thoroughly domesticated, transformed into an ‘icon of

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<sup>21</sup> P. M. Guerty, (with Kevin Switaj), ‘Tea, Porcelain, and Sugar in the British Atlantic World’, *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 3 (April 2004), p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Symmons, *One Continuous Picnic: a History of Eating in Australia* (Adelaide: Duck Press, 1982), p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Young, ‘A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England’, *Victorian Studies* 52, no.1 (Autumn 2009), p. 182

<sup>24</sup> Pettigrew, *The Tea Companion*, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Susie Khamis, ‘A Taste for Tea: How Tea travelled to (and through) Australian culture’, *ACH: The Journal of the History of Culture in Australia* 24 (January 2006), p. 3.

domesticity.<sup>26</sup> This conception of tea filtered through the Imperial network and was readily adopted by the colonies. For example, research undertaken by Leslie Holmes highlights tea was instrumental in preserving understandings of the British empire and reinforcing conceptions of English identity in Canada.<sup>27</sup> Khamis suggests that of those free settlers and convicts transported to Sydney, most would have become accustomed to tea as a regular part of their diet, and it was their drinking preferences that provided the solid foundation for the embrace of tea by future colonists.<sup>28</sup> Indeed tea was established as one of four food staples in the colony by the early nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Tea's sustained existence since colonisation was therefore the natural consequence of the country's imperial cultural heritage.

The process of the transformation of tea from the exotic to the domestic was deeply intertwined with empire. For the majority of the nineteenth century China was the primary source of tea for both England and Australia. Blainey contends that during the 1860s Australians drank Chinese tea leaves almost exclusively, but by the twentieth century Australians drank very little Chinese tea.<sup>30</sup> This shift in preferences was not a response to changing tastes, but to conscious imperial decisions. Fromer argues that the discovery of tea in India and Ceylon provided a solution to Britain's uneasy problem of balancing of the fact that the tea which English identity was based on originated in a foreign and unknown country. By harvesting and trading the tea from within the British Empire itself, the 'national beverage' became domesticated and authentically English.<sup>31</sup> Even though tea from British-controlled plantations was considered dramatically inferior in taste to Chinese teas<sup>32</sup>, the

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<sup>26</sup> Julie Fromer, '“Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant”: Representations of English National Identity in Victorian Histories of Tea', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36, no.2 (September 2008), p. 537.

<sup>27</sup> Leslie Holmes, 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way Through Tea', *Past Imperfect* 16 (2010), p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Khamis, 'A Taste for Tea', p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Robin Walker and Dave Roberts as cited in Khamis, 'A Taste for Tea', p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon*, p. 363.

<sup>31</sup> Fromer, 'Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant', p. 538

<sup>32</sup> Fromer, 'Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant', p. 539

strength of imperial connections nonetheless saw a steady increase of tea from these plantations. By the turn of the twentieth century, Indian and Ceylon teas monopolised nine tenths of the tea market in the British Empire.<sup>33</sup>

Australians soon followed these patterns of consumption established in Britain, despite being initially resistant to tea from India and Ceylon. The Asiatic Tea Company in particular had problems selling teas from these regions, as ‘a strong prejudice universally existed in the minds of the grocers against their sale.’<sup>34</sup> However, the growing number of advertisements for tea shops, such as those appearing in the *Bulletin*, from the early 1880s indicates that tea from these British colonies was gradually promoted and then accepted. In March 1881, the *Eastern Specialty Tea Company* opened a store in George Street, selling their ‘now famous 2 s. Tea, which will be found equal to any sold in Sydney at a much higher price’. In May 1881 it was reported that the *India and China Tea Company* opened in George Street, Haymarket, and in their advertisements they ‘beg to call special attention of the public to our blended teas’.<sup>35</sup> The prevalence of advertisements, and the tea shops themselves, serve as evidence attesting to the success of trade in colonial territories of Imperial goods.

The introduction of pre-packaged teas, as opposed to bulk tea which was usually packaged in large tea chests, marked a shift in both sales and consumption of tea. For example, the *Asiatic Tea Company* opened in 26 May 1881 in Pitt Street to sell their packet teas. The justification they provided for packet tea was that ‘tea being so universally used in Australia, the consumption consequently is very great, the weighing and packing of which takes considerable time meaning additional expense to every grocer doing even an ordinary trade, while in country towns where experienced grocers’ assistants are difficult to be obtained, the

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<sup>33</sup> Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon*, p. 364.

<sup>34</sup> *Bulletin*, Aug 26, 1882, p. 4

<sup>35</sup> *Bulletin*, 7 May 1881, p. 15.

weighing and packing of tea became a source of annoyance to the storekeeper – hence the great advantage to them in the use and general sale of packet teas’. The Company’s success was so great that they soon needed to move to larger premises, and they grew to include supplying packet tea to storekeepers across the city of Sydney and in wider New South Wales.<sup>36</sup> Mirroring the increasing commodification of tea in Britain, these tea shops indicated the success of tea commercial enterprise within Australia, and thus provide tangible support to the interconnectedness of the Empire.

This interconnectedness also manifested itself through the Tea Awards component of the Melbourne International Exhibition, held 1880-1881. The competition was split into different categories depending on the type of tea competing, such as pekoes, suchong, and uncoloured green teas. The competition prizes were awarded as either First Order of Merit or a Second Order of Merit.<sup>37</sup>

| Competitor | First Order of Merit | Second Order of Merit |
|------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| India      | 35                   | 77                    |
| Ceylon     | 11                   | 3                     |
| Japan      | 1                    | 2                     |
| Melbourne  | 1                    | 1                     |

Table 1: Tea Competition Prizes, Melbourne International Exhibition 1880-1881

Although a confusing award system, the preference for Indian tea is clearly discernible, suggesting its far superior quality to Ceylon tea. Given the relative newness of these teas to the market, these awards would have legitimised the Indian and Ceylon product in the Australian tea market. In esteeming and recognising this tea, these awards helped to reinforce

<sup>36</sup> *Bulletin*, 26 August 1882, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Melbourne International Exhibition, 1880-1881, Tea Awards Prize List, *State Library of New South Wales: Mitchell Wing*.

the pride associated with Empire-grown tea produce, indirectly contribute to an acceptance of their domestication

As in England where tea became an ‘icon of domesticity’, tea rapidly became embedded in the fabric of Australian social life. It assimilated itself into people’s habits, established itself in drinking routines and permeated both public and private spheres. A doctor working in Sydney co-authored a book in 1893, *The Art of Living in Australia*, with a lecturer of cookery at Sydney’s Technological College. In the book’s preface, Dr Philip Muskett wrote that ‘the consumption of butcher’s meat and tea is enormously *in excess of any common sense requirements*, and is paralleled nowhere else in the world.’<sup>38</sup> He further commented on the excessiveness of tea consumption, expressing his concern that women exceed ‘all bounds of moderation in this respect’. In his professional opinion, women grew ‘pale and bloodless’ with muscles that turned ‘soft and flabby’ and had a ‘shattered’ nervous system because of the extravagant presence of tea in their diets.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, women did drink a lot of tea. In the diary kept by Evelyn Louise Nicholson during her 1897 trip to Australia, she recorded that ‘...in most Australian houses, you are drinking some hot beverage or other all day long – viz 7 times. Tea before breakfast, tea or coffee at breakfast, cocoa in the middle of the morning, tea at lunch, tea at tea, tea at dinner, and cocoa before going to bed.’<sup>40</sup> As an English woman, it is noteworthy that she should comment on this, as it implied that it diverged from her regular routine at home in England. Her diary entry underscores the permanent presence of tea throughout the day. Tea regularly presented itself as a necessary accompaniment to meals and as such was used as a demarcation of time. That it was so embedded into drinking

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<sup>38</sup>Italics my own. The books complete title was *The Art of Living in Australia (together with three hundred Australian cookery recipes and accessory kitchen information by Mrs. H. Wicken, lecturer on Cookery to the Technical College, Sydney)*. As cited in Colin Bannerman, *A Friend in the Kitchen: Old Australian Cookery Books* (Kenthurst: Kangaroo Press, 1996), p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> As cited in Bannerman, *A Friend in the Kitchen*, p. 32.

<sup>40</sup> Evelyn Louise Nicholson, *Diary of a Trip to Australia 1897* (Online access: Project Gutenberg Australia via State Library of New South Wales), p. 9.

routines was not always appreciated. Appearing in the *Bulletin* in 1913 was a poem written by ‘Victoria, T.Cake’ that offered a negative opinion of the Australian tea drinking culture. Tea’s pervasiveness was emphasised in the line ‘tea, tea, afternoon tea – poisonous cup of it frequent and free’.<sup>41</sup> The word choice ‘poisonous’ implied it was not always a welcome drink of choice and the alliteration in ‘frequent and free’ suggested it was unavoidable. Although exasperation regarding the extensive dissemination of tea existed, such unenthusiastic attitudes had no apparent influence on modifying excessive tea drinking habits.

The perpetual presence of tea as an institutionalised drink is reflected in Australian literature. Fromer argued that tea was foundational to the Empire’s historical narrative, and this centrality to Victorian life meant that it existed in nearly every Victorian novel.<sup>42</sup> This too was reflected in Australian fiction of this time, especially in the works of female writers.<sup>43</sup> Tea is used as a literary device to progress storylines and represent ideas, and it also exists as a constant presence in the background. The regularity of the mention of tea mirrored reality in attesting to the extent of women’s tea consumption in daily life. The taking of tea is a recurring theme in Ada Cambridge’s novels. Mrs. Patty Kinnaird, one of the central characters in *A Woman’s Friendship* is described by her friend as a ‘slave to tea’. Not only does she drink it regularly, but she takes enjoyment from both its flavour and the chance to take a break.<sup>44</sup> In *Midnight and other stories* the protagonist is upset when her tea-drinking ritual is interrupted because of an illness. ‘She was accustomed to a cup of tea at four o’clock, and to-day pined for it desperately’; she is bitterly disappointed when she has to drink it cold

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<sup>41</sup> *Bulletin*, 14 August 1913, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth H. Chang, Elizabeth, ‘A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 64, no.4 (March 2010), p. 562.

<sup>43</sup>This is particularly apparent when female writers of this period are examined: Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career* (North Ryde: Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1966); Ethel Turner, *Seven Little Australians* (Camberwell: Puffin Books, 1985); Mary Grant Bruce, *Back to Billabong* (Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1992); Catherine Martin, *An Australian Girl* (Sydney: Pandora, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> Ada Cambridge, *A Woman’s Friendship* ed. Elizabeth Morrison, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1989), p. 20, p. 70.

as it leaves her unsatisfied.<sup>45</sup> The idea of tea being a routine element to daily life is evident in the practices of the sisters in another of Cambridge's novels, *The Three Miss Kings*. These women develop a pattern in the evenings of reading one of their newly bought novels from Mullen's bookstore, Melbourne, resting by the fire, chatting over needlework, and always having a cup of tea.<sup>46</sup> Whether tea is at the forefront of the main plot, like the afternoon tea hosted by the King sisters (to be discussed in chapter two), or mentioned as a secondary character sits drinking outside the periphery of the main action, tea drinking in Cambridge's work highlights the normality and acceptance of tea in daily life.

The prominence of tea in the daily routine was established from a young age. Louise Mack comments on this in her 1897 novel *Teens: A story of Australian School Girls*. In it, fourteen year old protagonist Lennie undertakes a daily ritual of drinking a cup of tea and having a slice of bread and butter with her sisters and mother, and tells them about her day at school. That she should do this appears perfectly acceptable, Mack commenting that 'all Australian girls, even before they reach their teens, are tea-drinkers.' Moreover, these young girls appreciate their tea: 'They are connoisseurs too, and the ten-year-olds will ask for a little more sugar, a little more milk, some more tea to make their cup stronger, or some hot water to weaken it, in the self-possessed voices of their mothers'.<sup>47</sup> Although fiction, this reveals that tea drinking began during childhood and was taken seriously from a young age. Moreover, tea was tied with the relationship between mother and daughter, and as such was a regular feature in gendered domestic life. This connection between family and tea drinking is seen in another of Cambridge's novels, *Sisters*. The character Deb attributes some of her sadness at not becoming a mother to the fact that she missed out on having a daughter's

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<sup>45</sup> Ada Cambridge, *At Midnight and Other Stories* (London: Ward, Lock, 1897), p. 114.

<sup>46</sup> Ada Cambridge, *The Three Miss Kings: A novel* (London: W. Einemann, 1891).

<sup>47</sup> Louise Mack, *Teens: A Story of Australian School Girls* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1923).

company at home, 'to make the tea, and to chat with, and to lean on!'<sup>48</sup> This this highlights that tea appreciation was fostered within the family unit from a young age, and demonstrates its importance in the building of familial relationships.

Operating within an imperial context, Australia's relationship with tea mirrored British standards and ideas. Nonetheless, Australian culture developed its own identity in relation to tea consumption that diverged from the English norm. This difference resulted from the bush ethos of Australia's rural landscape that had no parallels within the British empire. Within Australia existed a rather curious regional culture whereby in a rural setting there was a direct link between tea and masculinity<sup>49</sup> so that men had direct access to tea in a manner that was denied to women; however, in the urban, domestic setting, it was women who had the privileged access to tea. Tea drinking in rural Australia often rejected the British norm that tea should be only associated with domesticity, family ritual and intimacy.<sup>50</sup> Rather, in the Australian bush tea drinking also became linked with masculinity, independence and egalitarianism<sup>51</sup>, virtues manifested in the metal kettle known as the billy.

Melissa Harper contends that while the billy was democratic and used universally across gender, class and both settler and Aboriginal populations for a variety of reasons, it was particularly associated with the bushman, and the swagman<sup>52</sup>. That the billy should embody the masculine swagman is perhaps unsurprising, as Grimshaw et al have argued that the construction of a colonial masculinity that valued all-male company and rejected female

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<sup>48</sup> Ada Cambridge, *Sisters* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 193.

<sup>49</sup>Melissa Harper, 'Billy', in Harper, Melissa and Richard White (Eds.), *Symbols of Australia: Uncovering the Stories Behind the Myths* (University of New South Wales Press and National Museum of Australia: Sydney, 2010), p. 87.

<sup>50</sup> Chang, E. H, *A Necessary Luxury*, p. 562.

<sup>51</sup> Harper, 'Billy', p. 83.

<sup>52</sup> Harper, 'Billy', p. 85.

equality was the result of a 'raw male frontier.'<sup>53</sup> Even as late as 1900 there was eleven men to for every ten women in the colony, constituting the 'highest masculinity rates in the world'.<sup>54</sup> For bushmen, the capability to brew tea well was of the utmost importance.<sup>55</sup> It was observed in 1905 by the Australian bushman E.C. Buckley that the title of the best maker of billy tea was one that bushmen fought over.<sup>56</sup> The billy lacked the ritual and elegance associated with the cosmopolitan tea set, which will be discussed in detail in chapter two. Instead, it was common practice that hot water and tea leaves be added to the billy after use, without first emptying it of the previous serving.<sup>57</sup> While this no doubt served a practical function, it also contrasted rural practice with the norms of domesticity characteristic of an urban home.

This rejection of domesticity and femininity by male tea drinkers is evident within literature that emerged during this time. A poem appearing in 1898 in the *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* commented on the importance of tea for the Australian man and its elevation over other traditionally masculine beverages: 'Let Irishmen praise whisky, And Englishman their ail/... but when I've ridden, hard all day, never offer me/a drop of any other brew but billy tea'. Later in the poem, tea drinking is seen to offer respite and comfort, as 'supreme the tea-pot reigns', but a clear distinction is drawn between the 'beef and damper [and]... good black tea' of the Queensland bush with the 'fine ladies [who] all sip tea... cosy and tete-a-tete'.<sup>58</sup> It is clear there is no place for such refined behaviour within the Australian man's bush. Similarly, Henry Lawson's 1901 poem 'The men who made Australia', explicitly esteems the link between tea, the hard-working ethos of the bush, and masculinity. His references to

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<sup>53</sup> Grimsham et al, *Creating a Nation*, p. 114.

<sup>54</sup> Beverly Kingston, 'Glad, Confident Morning' in Bolton, Geoffrey, (ed.), *The Oxford History of Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 114.

<sup>55</sup> Harper, 'Billy', p. 86.

<sup>56</sup> As cited in Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon*, p. 358.

<sup>57</sup> Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon*, p. 359.

<sup>58</sup> *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 16 August 1898, p. 6.

‘round the camp fire’, ‘muddy billabong’ and ‘great North-Western Stock-Routes’ establish a scene clearly removed from the refinements of urban life. Here the fencers, drovers and shearers take their billy as they go about the important business of ‘drafting future histories of states!’<sup>59</sup> Later in 1911, May Coats from Upper Sturt writes in *The Register* that ‘Mid the wattle and the gum trees and dear old stringybark/We unpack the different hampers, each as happy as a lark/And spread out the good provisions, then away we go to see/If the dear old billys boiling, for it’s time we made the tea/ Now billy tea is certainly a delicious kind of treat/And the boys will tell you plainly that it ‘really can’t be beat...’ This enthusiastic poem, written by an obvious tea-lover, emphasises the joy derived from drinking tea, and correlates this delight with the bush setting. He highlights the masculine nature of the experience, both with reference to ‘the boys’, and the rejection of dainty protocols in ‘if you haven’t teaspoons handy, take one of the cleanest sticks/for it really doesn’t matter when the milk and sugar’s mixed’.<sup>60</sup>

The practice of tea drinking by rural Australians was different to the tea drinking experiences available in the cities, as demonstrated by the billy. For squatters, tea drinking became an integral part of the rhythm of station life in a way that far exceeded that of their urban counterparts. Blainey suggests that during the 1870s farmers or selectors might consume four cups of tea with each meal, and thus had the potential to consume sixty litres of tea or more weekly.<sup>61</sup> Mack’s *Teens: A story of Australian School Girls* makes interesting observations regarding astounding drinking practices in rural Australia. The protagonist Lennie visited her family in the country for a month when she was twelve, and while there found that ‘everyone

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<sup>59</sup> Henry Lawson, ‘The men who made Australia’, as cited in Harper ‘Billy’, p. 87.

<sup>60</sup> *The Registrar*, 10 June 1911, p. 6. This rejection of dainty and domestic ideals is reinforced by a nineteenth century account for how to make a ‘draught of quart-pot tea’ in the bush. This involved highly elaborate instructions using ‘the hollow of a dead log’, a ‘battered and blackened pannikin’, ‘stirring the mixture with a bit of stick’ and ‘the company of your mates.’ As cited in Rosa Campbell-Praed, *My Australian Girlhood: Sketches and Impressions of Bush Life* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1902), pp. 46-46.

<sup>61</sup> Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon*, p. 359.

connected with an Australian sheep station, drink tea more often, and in greater quantities, than any other people in the tea-drinking world'. Tea drinking began 'at half-past six, with the early morning cup of tea. Then, at breakfast, an hour or so later, came two, or perhaps three, more cups. Not infrequently there was tea at eleven o'clock. There was always tea at lunch. And tea at four o'clock was a meal which no member of the family would ever care to miss. And the seven o'clock dinner would have seemed a poor thing to the squatter if his large, strong, sweet cup of tea had not been placed within his reach.'<sup>62</sup> Tea consumption on this scale mirrors the estimation postulated by Blainey. As previously established, tea was a pervasive presence in urban society. However, tea in this instance is clearly used for respite and as a marker of time to divide up the day's duties, it defined certain meal times. For the squatter, tea symbolised the cessation of the working day and became his reward. For the shearers, who moved around the countryside seasonally, provision was also made to ensure constant access to tea. In each of the shearers' huts, large buckets of tea and coffee rested above ashes. As the men both slept and worked there, it was always close at hand.<sup>63</sup>

It is suggested by Richard Waterhouse that formal codes of tea drinking etiquette emerged in the rural setting as a result of the permanent presence of women. These were observed nominally rather than strictly, however, and the greater acceptance of informality differed significantly from the etiquette expected in the cities.<sup>64</sup> A glimpse into some of these practices is offered by Rosa Campbell-Praed's autobiography, which details her childhood experiences growing up in rural North Queensland in the mid-late nineteenth century. She described a visit she made to take tea at a neighbouring selector's property further reinforces the more informal nature of rural etiquette. When she and her companion found out that their host was laying a table for them, they insisted they would be content to take 'a cup of tea on a

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<sup>62</sup> Mack, *Teens*, p. 20.

<sup>63</sup> Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon*, p. 227.

<sup>64</sup> Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid*, p. 117.

tray'. This insistence suggests that they were comfortable, and used to, drinking tea without ceremony. Instead, however, they went and took tea in the kitchen where 'the table was fixed up with such a tea as never was before – such scones and such preserves, and such bread!' Although the food offered was common to afternoon tea, taking tea in the kitchen was not usually practised by urban counterparts. Rather, tea was taken in a separate room in the house. Tea in this instance reveals that etiquette in the bush was pragmatic and relaxed. However, even in a poor selector's home, removed from 'civilised' society, there existed a connection between tea and the comfort of domesticity.

As demonstrated, tea was seemingly everywhere; from the squatter's home, to the shearer's work break, and the selector's kitchen. Understanding further the full extent of tea's entry into the social existence of Australian life requires a somewhat eclectic exploration of the patterns of its consumption as a beverage and as part of afternoon tea. As well as this, picnics provide an example of one popular leisure pursuit that became deeply engrained in Australian culture. As such, they offer an additional site in which to demonstrate the infiltration of tea into the ritualised experiences of leisure time.<sup>65</sup> Although picnics did not require the drinking of tea, it was often included as part of the social activity. Picnics were a time of meeting and socialising informally with friends and family, where people could enjoy the cessation of normal routine for enjoyments sake. Australia's climate accounted for the ease and popularity in which picnics and outdoor excursions took place.<sup>66</sup> Picnics had been established as an 'Australian institution' by the mid 1880's, with a visitor in 1885 remarking that in Sydney 'there is never a fine day in the year without a picnic, nor ever a wet day without a regret for

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<sup>65</sup>Valeria McKenzie, *The Passing Parade of Picnics and Pleasures, Early Australian Times* (Chatswood: Centennial Publications, 1982); Michael Symons, *One Continuous Picnic: a history of eating in Australia* (Adelaide: Duck Press, 1982).

<sup>66</sup>Beverly Kingston, 'Glad, Confident Morning', p. 147.

a picnic postponed.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the English visitor Michael Davitt commented of Sydney in 1898 that ‘no city in the world is so well provided for with places of pleasurable resort... Excursions, picnics, drives, outings seem to go on all year round.’<sup>68</sup> Picnics were social engagements that were taken very seriously, as evidenced by the amount of planning that was required. In the *Western Mail*, 1900, ‘Mrs. Homely’ of ‘Town and Country’ outlined measures for a successful picnic. For food she recommended ‘home-made scones, a generous plum load, johny cake, fruit pasties, fruit salad and passion fruit and cream’. She suggested a corkscrew, lemonade opener, tin-opener, matchbox, mosquito net, bag for tea, pocket pincushion, needles and cotton, and some brandy in case of snake bites all be brought along.<sup>69</sup>

Picnics were interesting sites of leisure as they had the potential to transcend traditional social divisions. In his discussion of social life in Australia, Francis Adams was particularly struck by the marked contrast between Australian and English picnics, which were ‘usually rather painful things’. He suggested this because ‘happily the bush people do not yet know the claims to social superiority, and behave as though they are equals.’<sup>70</sup> The implication being that participants were not bound maintaining class structures. Photographs from the early twentieth century show groups of men and women of different classes picnicking in public parks, under elaborately erected tents, by the sea, and in the country. A photograph taken in 1900 in Victoria shows a group of ten drinking out of teacups, sitting in the hollow of the tea trunk of a giant Gilderoy tree. The image captures the sense of adventure and exciting thrill that could be associated with picnics, and the social ease that existed between men and women, and adults and children.

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<sup>67</sup> As cited in Shar Jones & Kirstin, Otto, *Colonial food and drink 1788-1901* (Sydney: History Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1985), p. 28.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Davitt, *Life and Progress in Australasia* (London: Methuen & Co, 1898), p. 188.

<sup>69</sup> *Western Mail*, 22 December 1900, p. 59.

<sup>70</sup> Adams, Francis, ‘Social life in Australia’, *The Fortnightly Review: London*, 50, (October 1891), p. 550.

Picnics during this time could also be elaborate and impressive occasions, designed to entertain on a large scale.<sup>71</sup> ‘Lyth’ recalls a picnic that he was invited in Vaucluse in the 1880s. A ‘recherché luncheon’ was provided for the one hundred guests at this ‘very grand affair’. A ‘German band was engaged, boats provided for those who liked the water, cricket for others and dancing for all.... The pretty girls and handsome men made delightful partners, and time passed too quickly.’<sup>72</sup> Another picnic on a grand scale took place in the form of a Sydney newspaper departmental event. Luncheon was provided for the three hundred and thirty guests comprised employees and their families, and races, dancing and games were offered as entertainment.<sup>73</sup> Within the spatial organisation of society, picnics transcended the binaries of leisure and work, men and women, working class and wealthy, and adult and children. As a social occasion, picnics provided another occasion for tea drinking which reaffirmed its overt existence in people’s daily lives.

Australia’s obsession with tea was the result of many complex factors. Originally connected with the exotic, it became utterly domestic; a symbol of empire that marked the success of Imperial trade and related commercial enterprise. Its associations with civilised society meant that it became a permanent fixture of everyday life. As demonstrated, it mediated the tensions between public and private, men and women, and commercial and leisure pursuits. Tea developed its own identity within the Australian context, which was particularly pronounced in rural Australia with its links to the billy and masculinity. The popularity of tea meant that it

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<sup>71</sup> In a slightly different vein, *The Advertiser* reported on an impressive bush picnic enjoyed by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall during their 1901 Australian. The Duke took part in the mustering of 300 cattle, and he and his party enjoyed tea in ‘true bush style’. What made the picnic noteworthy was that the original intention had been for the Duke and Duchess to sample billy tea. However, rather than drink from the billy they instead brewed tea in one of their silver teapots ‘in a fashion unknown to the great majority of bush picnic parties’, to the disgust of one of the station hands (*The Advertiser*, 28 May 1901, p. 5).

<sup>72</sup> ‘Lyth’ (pseud), *The Golden South: Memories of Australian home life from 1843-1888* (London, Ward & Downey, 1890), pp. 94-95.

<sup>73</sup> The picnic given by the departments of ‘The Sydney Morning Herald’, ‘The Sydney Mail’ and ‘The Echo’ to Messrs. John Fairfax & Sons and Mr. E. Ross Fairfax, at Botony on 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1889 [for private circulation only], Sydney: John Sands, Printer, George St, 1889, p. 4.

became a common element of most social engagements across this period. This was particularly illuminated through a study of picnics. Although tea could not be separated from its imperial context, it nonetheless occupied a distinct position in Australian society.

## Chapter Two: Afternoon Tea in Domestic Life

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A 1903 photograph depicts a party of five adults partaking in an afternoon tea party at ‘Millera’ Station, on the Rocky River near Tenterfield, New South Wales. Seated in a garden, four women hold onto their tea cups and saucers while a man spoons sugar into his companion’s tea cup. A large tea pot and milk jug sit in a tea-tray that rests upon a small, round, wicker table. This intimate image encapsulates the elegance of afternoon tea within an Australian context. The intersection of tea drinking, socialising, and material goods created a refined, leisured experience. This chapter will explore the intricacies surrounding the social ritual of afternoon tea within domestic life and consider how it balanced societal expectations of propriety and social customs within the informal confines of the domestic setting. It will then consider both the social protocols and elements of hospitality that comprised the experience, as well as how it was conceived as a leisure experience. Finally, it will examine the material goods used in this experience and explicate deeper social issues.

The concept of afternoon tea is typically attributed to the seventh Duchess of Bedford, Anna Maria Stanhope, at Belvoir Castle, England during the 1840s. Dissatisfied with the wait between lunch and dinner, she ordered that a tray of tea complete with delicious pastries and bread be brought to her in the middle of the afternoon. As it was already common practice for men to take refreshments in gentleman’s clubs, she began inviting the ladies of her acquaintance to partake in afternoon tea with her.<sup>74</sup> Afternoon tea emerged as a popular social trend during the Victorian era. Jane Pettigrew suggests that as afternoon tea crossed class barriers and became deeply entrenched in eating patterns, it soon became a national

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<sup>74</sup> Jill Jones-Evans, *High tea at the Victoria Room* (Chatswood: New Holland Australia, 2010), p. 8.

institution.<sup>75</sup> Mrs. Beeton, known for her book on household management during this era, referred to it as a ‘mild form of entertainment’ which developed into a gastronomic ritual.<sup>76</sup> The popularity of afternoon tea in Britain attracted the attention of the Australian popular press. In 1880 the *Queanbeyan Age* recorded how it was ‘the most popular of institutions’ in London because of the ‘pretty china, beautiful women, artistic surroundings, intellectual and informal chat, music, flowers [and] flirting’ that comprised the experience.<sup>77</sup> Later in 1888, the *Illustrated Sydney News* commented that the food provided during tea time in England was becoming ‘much more complicated’ with the provision of fruit, a variety of cakes and confectionery.<sup>78</sup>

The development of afternoon tea within Australia responded to the traditions that were established in England. While influenced by the glamour and elegance associated with British precedent, afternoon tea nonetheless adopted its own Australian personality as it became a popular form of recreation. In her 1913 etiquette guide, Theodosia Wallace declared ‘it is Australians who have glorified afternoon tea.’<sup>79</sup> This recognises the fervour with which the afternoon tea experience was embraced. On one hand, it became formalised, dignified and embedded into the social calendar. On the other, it became a cherished daily practice that was ritualised into the daily routine. From as early as 1884, practical cooking lessons were being provided at the Sydney School of Arts which were centred around the preparation of afternoon tea and what food would be suitable to serve.<sup>80</sup> The fact that these lessons existed is indicative of the social necessity of this meal. These classes also express the desire for it to

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<sup>75</sup> Pettigrew, *A social history of tea*, p. 102.

<sup>76</sup> Bannerman, *A Friend in the Kitchen*, p. 47.

<sup>77</sup> *Queanbeyan Age*, 15 February 1880, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Illustrated Sydney News*, 30 August 1888, page 25, 26.

<sup>79</sup> Theodosia Ada Wallace, *The Etiquette of Australia: A Handy Book of The Common Usages of Everyday Life and Society* (Sydney, 1913), p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1884, p.3. The lecturer mentioned in this article, Mrs. H. Wicken, co-authored the book with Philip Muskett as discussed in chapter one.

be performed with excellence and according to specific social demands. Whether it was a result of a prearranged invitation with one's invited afternoon guests, or the spontaneous arrival of unexpected visitors, afternoon tea emerged as a significant social occasion.

Afternoon tea in the home required imagining a particular type of social world. Within this world there were social standards and requirements that needed to be met. On a superficial level it appears that afternoon tea broke certain conventions of social practice. It did not follow the same hierarchical protocol or the formality typically associated with other social engagements. There was however a tension between 'tea drinking' and 'afternoon tea'. As discussed in chapter one, although all members of society drank tea, not all Australians took afternoon tea as a ritualised break in the afternoon. The didactic text appearing in Australian newspapers during this time adopted egalitarian language when discussing afternoon tea. It was declared to be available to 'both rich and poor in the social world' as it was not confined by financial restraints or determined by class. It was not considered an expensive form of hospitality and was accordingly espoused as being ideal for the young housekeeper who was unable to afford more 'lavish' social entertainment.<sup>81</sup> It was referred to as an 'informal' affair,<sup>82</sup> in which the attraction lay in its simplicity with an 'absence of fuss or ceremony'<sup>83</sup> and described as being 'well within the limits of a modest establishment'.<sup>84</sup> However, despite adopting language of apparent classlessness, the popular press contained implicit insinuations pertaining to a particular exclusivity that existed around the ritual of afternoon tea. Assumptions were made based on wealth, status, and availability of leisure time. Although claiming to be a democratised social ritual, afternoon tea catered to the needs of the aspirational middle class.

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<sup>81</sup> *Western Mail*, 24 January 1891, p. 27.

<sup>82</sup> *Western Mail*, 26 March 1897, p. 37.

<sup>83</sup> *Illustrated Sydney News*, 30 August 1888, p. 25.

<sup>84</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 1912, page 5.

These claims were further evident in an article appearing in the *Western Mail* in 1897 that asked what could be more ‘simple’ than inviting a party of ten to twelve friends over for a ‘pleasant two to three hours’ to take afternoon tea? It suggested all that was needed was ‘sparkling china, shining silver and pretty dishes of dainty cakes resting on lace-edged doilies.’ It insisted on having the tea service close to the door ‘so that the maid will not have far to bring the fresh tea’.<sup>85</sup> Certain assumptions were made about the readership: they possessed a budget capable of catering to a large group of people, owned the required material goods, had access to domestic service and had the time available to partake in the afternoon-long proceedings. The need for certain material goods, food and time was a recurring theme in newspaper articles. Thus, afternoon tea perpetuated a middle class social world of particular wealth-related expectations and social ideals.

These wealth-related expectations revolved largely around the material goods that were needed for afternoon tea to take place. The tea silver service was the primary apparatus used in the taking of tea, and was an expense that the working class could not afford due to budget limitations. The silver service became an emblem of respectability, a marker of wealth, and a desirable artefact for middle class possession. In a full-page advertisement appearing in the *Bulletin* in 1911, the retailer A. Saunders advertised their silverware, with six items relating directly to afternoon tea. The hand-engraved, silver-plated set included: a kettle, tea pot, cream jug, sugar and cream stand, cake stand and biscuit barrel.<sup>86</sup> At a total of cost of one hundred and sixty pounds, sixteen pence, it was indeed a significant monetary investment to

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<sup>85</sup> *Western Mail*, 26 March 1897, p. 37.

<sup>86</sup> *Bulletin*, 17 August 1911, p. 28.

purchase the A Saunders tea setting.<sup>87</sup> Ownership of such expensive property was indicative not only of existing wealth but also of a need to maintain middle class respectability.

Expectations regarding monetary expenditure extended further than the tea sets that were used for drinking tea. There were certain material goods that were expected during this social custom. The afternoon tea table was significant in afternoon tea as a place for people to gather centrally, as well as rest the cup and saucer. By 1910 the round table was the more popular choice for afternoon tea tables.<sup>88</sup> It was considered necessary that this should be decorated, and for a time white velvet was a popular choice for tablecloths, particularly those bordered with gold lace. Likewise, velvet tea cosies made of velvet were also admired, and often featured the owner's monogram.<sup>89</sup> There were new and desirable commodities that appeared that were marketed as 'novelties for the afternoon tea tray'. In 1910 *New Idea* offered two of these as free gifts to new subscribers: a tea-infuser, and a set of sugar tongs.<sup>90</sup> Other novelty items included the tea-wagon, in 1903, which allowed for the easy moving of an entire tea service throughout the house and even outside.<sup>91</sup> In order to achieve the holistic desired experience of afternoon tea, it was necessary to not just provide the tea, but to offer an expected range of associated culinary and material goods. The diversity of this range of these goods further highlights the improbability that working class budgets could aspire to possess such items. Accordingly, these material apparatuses reinforce that afternoon tea ritual was not, in fact, a democratised ritual.

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<sup>87</sup> Likewise, the tea service advertised for F. Lasseter and Co (Limited) at George St, Sydney, offered 'one hundred patterns of tea service' as well as a selection items of including 'biscuit dishes' and 'cake baskets' (*Bulletin*, 31 July 1880, p. 2).

<sup>88</sup> *The Queenslander*, 3 December 1910, p. 15.

<sup>89</sup> *Illustrated Sydney News*, 30 August, 1888, p. 25.

<sup>90</sup> *New Idea*, 6 June, 1910, p. 563; *New Idea*, 6 September 1910, p. 739.

<sup>91</sup> *The Queenslander*, 11 April 1903.

The creation of a particular type of space was necessary in the ritual of afternoon tea. This was achieved when feminine ideals of ‘lightness, prettiness and gentility,’<sup>92</sup> were incorporated into the overall presentation. The combination of effort and time required in establishing such an arrangement often excluded working class women as it was at odds with typical working hours. Ada Cambridge’s novel, *The Three Miss Kings*, provides an example from popular culture demonstrating a successfully feminine display. The recently orphaned King sisters move to a Melbourne apartment from their home in the country. The sisters prepare a table to host an afternoon tea for their landlady and a new friend Mr. Paul Brion. The finished product is the very picture of domesticity with a kettle heating up over the hearth, home baked muffins, the elegance of the white table cloth and fresh air through an open window.<sup>93</sup> This picture of femininity and daintiness is likewise imitated in Mack’s *Teens: A story of Australian School Girls*. Here, the heart of the protagonist Lennie is ‘filled with pleasure’ as the ‘cosy lamplight’ shone upon a table filled with ‘piles of hot scones and little fairy cakes’, ‘beautiful’ salad, and an environment that was ‘bright and merry’.<sup>94</sup> Afternoon tea was associated with what was refined in terms of style and it sought to imitate the genteel. This is discernible in a 1907 photograph showing three ladies taking afternoon tea in Santo Vale, South Australia.<sup>95</sup> Seated in the garden outside, they have paid careful attention to the arrangement, setting a vase of fresh flowers upon the white tablecloth. Afternoon tea was not about drinking the tea alone, but drinking in an environment that was aesthetically appealing. Similarly, a 1900 photograph showing six adults taking afternoon tea in the garden at Unley Park, South Australia,<sup>96</sup> displays the effort that has gone into the presentation, with the presence of the china tea service, silver trays, and a three-tiered platter piled with delicious baked treats.

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<sup>92</sup> Symons, *One Continuous Picnic*, p. 160.

<sup>93</sup> Cambridge, *Three Miss Kings*, p. 31.

<sup>94</sup> Mack, *Teens*, p. 28.

<sup>95</sup> ‘Three ladies partaking of afternoon tea at Santo Vale’, 1907, *Apilla Collection*, PRG 483/1/59, State Library of South Australia.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Afternoon tea in the garden’, 1900, *Mortlock Pictorial Collection*, B 62452, State Library of South Australia.

Many photographs from this period attest to the importance of dainty presentation; of ensuring a genteel table arrangement that looked polished but not overbearing, and balanced sophistication with simplicity.

The taking of afternoon tea in the home manifested itself as an activity predominantly suited to women. Certainly, men drank tea and also took part in these engagements, but it was women who monopolised the social practices and interactions which occurred. As part of her introduction to domestic duties, a daughter was given the responsibility of caring for, and looking after the afternoon tea table.<sup>97</sup> Unlike boys, girls grew up intimately connected with the afternoon tea process. Men tended to be critical of this social world, and fail to recognise its intricacies and importance. Some men perceived it as an engagement that, unlike their own work, did not contribute to society and accordingly disparaged it. In 1873 the *Rockhampton Bulletin* even used the existence of afternoon tea to reject female enfranchisement, arguing that if women entered the workforce they would not be able leave early to take tea and so the ‘special pleasure of women’ would soon disappear. From its beginnings, therefore, afternoon tea was firmly associated with femininity. The article suggested that men could never partake in five o’clock tea in the same way that women did. Even if a man was given the opportunity to partake in the experience with his friends, ‘you would still find him incompetent to take it like a woman. The ease, the grace, the quiet, the absence of hurry, the charming aimlessness, the indescribable air of inaction, with which a woman takes her five o’clock tea, are entirely beyond his powers.’ Given man’s inability incompetence to fully appreciate this experience, the article suggested that he watch a woman taking her afternoon tea so that he might ‘learn how great and how beautiful is the art of idleness.’<sup>98</sup> These snide comments reflect some attitudes of the time. Some men were initially resistant to afternoon tea because of the

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<sup>97</sup> *The Queenslander*, 11 April 1903.

<sup>98</sup> *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 16 October 1873, p. 3.

negative associations they drew between it and women's desire for scandalous gossip,<sup>99</sup> and because they thought it served no practical purpose as it was unnecessary to eat so late and 'spoil' dinner.<sup>100</sup>

Conversely, the implication that it was not socially acceptable for men to take afternoon tea is at odds with what was practiced. Photographs from this period show men seated comfortably around a small table, or standing outside in the garden, holding a tea cup and saucer, as engaged in the experience as the women with whom they are socialising. Furthermore, photographs capture fathers spending time with their family at afternoon tea time. For example, a 1906 photograph from the Benson residence, in Wanaaring, New South Wales, shows a man sitting in the garden with his wife and children. Here, the youngest child leans on her father's lap, and in this intimate and informal setting, the man is at ease drinking tea and enjoying a restful break in his day. Moreover, men had been assigned a role, albeit an awkward role at times, during afternoon tea. Instructions to have men hand out the tea cups appear repeatedly during this period in both the newspapers and etiquette guides.<sup>101</sup> This was in response to the fact men were 'always ready to assist in these occasions',<sup>102</sup> and a recognition by the hostess that the ritual involved them in a meaningful way.

Male interest in particular facets of the afternoon experience is exemplified in a rather curious lawsuit involving a fine china tea set between John Giles and his grandson in 1901. John Giles sued his grandson Isaac firstly for the recovery of misspent money and secondly for money to cover the costs incurred for breakages to part of his tea set. The value of the broken crockery was estimated at three pounds. However, the issue was that the whole tea set was

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<sup>99</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June 1888, page 7.

<sup>100</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 28 November 1903, p. 13.

<sup>101</sup> For example, *Brisbane Courier*, 28 November 1903, p. 13; *Western Mail*, 27 July 1903, p. 38.

<sup>102</sup> *Western Mail*, 26 March 1897, p. 37.

unsalable as the pattern was ‘antiquated’ and no longer available. In his defence, Isaac maintained that the tea set had not been used for at least fifteen years and that it was his by legal right, having inherited it from his grandmother. Eventually judgment was passed in his favour, and he did not have to pay back his grandfather.<sup>103</sup> The case was complex and clearly about more than simply the tea set. However, it suggests the significance of owning such an item and keeping it in the family through the generations, regardless of the level of its usage. It also communicates middle class anxieties relating to the need for possessing these markers of respectability, and the alarm that resulted from the loss of this symbol. Importantly, this unusual example demonstrates the high esteem that some men had for certain component of the material apparatus that comprised the afternoon tea experience.

A contributing factor to the conception of afternoon tea as women’s activity was that it provided a forum where women could converse freely and gossip with each other. When the hostess gave out a tea cup and saucer to her guest, she created a comfortable social setting that did away with any formality that may have arisen from two parties meeting together. The intimacy of the tea cup meant that women became ‘confidential’.<sup>104</sup> It was this nature of conversation that appeared so foreign to the writer of the *Rockhampton Bulletin*. He failed to recognise that these conversations were not ‘idle’ but important for relationship building. This link between gossip and afternoon tea featured several times in Cambridge’s novels. During the course of the afternoon tea hosted by the King sisters in *The Three Miss Kings*, Mr. Brion asks the second eldest, Patty, to play the piano. Her hesitation to do so stems from her concern that she ‘shouldn’t play things in the broad daylight, when people want to gossip over their tea,’ as she recognises the importance of her sisters having the opportunity to chat

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<sup>103</sup> *The Register*, 7 March 1901, p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> *The Queenslander*, 3 December 1910, p. 15.

with their guest Mrs. McIntyre. Fortunately, her decision to play does not disrupt the conversation that is taking place at the table. However, rather than impart any salacious information, Mrs. McIntyre communicates to the girls ‘the only proper way of making tomato sauce’ as well as her ‘wide experience in orange marmalade and quince jelly’. Gossiping, then, was merely an avenue through which women could share life experiences with each other. Later, when the girls are visited by Mrs Duff-Scott, they sit sit until six o’clock ‘gossiping pleasantly’ over a fresh pot of tea, and bread and butter.<sup>105</sup> It was natural, in this instance, that eating and conversing should happen together. This combination again appears in Cambridge’s *At Midnight and Other Stories*. Here, a pair of school girls spend the afternoon taking tea and ‘chattering across the table about the affairs of their school, their approaching examinations, the holidays, the matric and so on.’<sup>106</sup> Although the conversations which took place over afternoon tea may not have been ostensibly profound, they were nevertheless valued as opportunities to share common-place knowledge with each other, and for women to strengthen their relationships with each other. Afternoon was perpetuated as a social activity of choice because it provided a social space in which they were free to converse about issues of importance to them, rather than what was expected of them at more formal occasions.

Taking afternoon tea was very different from what was experienced during the social event ‘at homes’ during the nineteenth century. The term ‘at homes’ referred to the custom whereby a woman would remain at her place of residence during a certain period of the day, and accepted visiting calls from other women of her acquaintance.<sup>107</sup> These fulfilled obligations and certain expectations, and were important in maintaining formalised relationships. This

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<sup>105</sup> Cambridge, *Three Miss Kings*, p. 92-96.

<sup>106</sup> Cambridge, *Midnight and Other Stories*, p. 108.

<sup>107</sup> Leslie Holmes, ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way Through Tea’, *Past Imperfect* 16 (2010), p. 76.

formed one part of the 'genteel performance' that was adopted by the women of the gentry to support their claims of status and superiority.<sup>108</sup> This performance emphasised the importance of rituals and appearances for the perpetuation of exclusivity, including intricate systems of issuing invitations, appropriate styles of clothing and the maintenance of relationships with desirable families.<sup>109</sup> This performance of visiting another woman at her home incorporated much more than what appeared at the surface level. Receiving calls was of social imperative, as these ceremonies provided an indication of social acceptance, and established a woman's importance within a particular group.<sup>110</sup> Young suggests that the act of 'making calls' during women's 'at homes' was to establish formal connections with acquaintances, rather than provide a forum in which women could strengthen friendships.<sup>111</sup> Drinking tea during at 'at home' was not just for enjoyment's sake. When it was taken, it formed part of an 'elaborate world of ritual' that involved the 'ruthless process of inclusion and exclusion' as members within a social circle were determined.<sup>112</sup> According to Russell, women's engagement with this type of activity was 'crucial to the survival of the gentry' as these genteel feminine performances maintained 'the whole elaborate edifice of society.'<sup>113</sup> Afternoon tea, by contrast to these 'at homes', was not used as a medium to establish and assert social superiority, not did it have the same capacity to reconfigure social circles and influence relationships.

Although afternoon tea rejected some of the formal conventions that were undertaken during 'at homes', there nonetheless existed a unique form of social protocol governing the experience. It involved a performance which consisted of a delicate balance between

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<sup>108</sup> Russell, *A Wish for Distinction*, p. 2.

<sup>109</sup> Russell, *A wish of Distinction*, pp. 47-56.

<sup>110</sup> Russell, *A wish for Distinction*, p. 50.

<sup>111</sup> Young, *Middle Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 140.

<sup>112</sup> Ann Judith Pool as cited in Holmes, 'Westward the Course of Empire takes It Way Through', p. 78.

<sup>113</sup> Russell, *A Wish for Distinction*, pp. 199- 200.

propriety and certain societal expectations within the realities of daily life. Invitations to afternoon tea were ‘issued on the lady’s visiting card with the words written in the left hand corner’. If the afternoon tea was to be a ‘big affair’, invitations were sent out a fortnight in advance, otherwise a week would have sufficed.<sup>114</sup> It was not necessary to reply to these invitations unless it was specifically stated on the card,<sup>115</sup> nor were return calls necessary in the acknowledgement of an afternoon tea.<sup>116</sup> This indicates that afternoon tea did not carry the same sense of obligation required with other social engagements, such as a sit-down meal. During these occasions the hostess was to receive her guests standing, ‘aided by other members of the family or intimate friends’.<sup>117</sup> These protocols reveal that behind the facade of domestic comfort lay a need to maintain polite social conduct and order. The *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser* produced a social column in 1891 outlining protocols expected at certain social engagements. With respect to afternoon tea, it is stated that young women were not to entertain in their own name unless an informal affair in which only other young women were invited.<sup>118</sup> An encounter in Ada Cambridge’s *The Three Miss Kings* reveals the awkwardness which arose when the rules were not followed. When the sisters first invite their neighbour, Mr. Brion, to take tea with them in their apartment and because they are unchaperoned, their invitation is rejected. It is the source of great embarrassment when they realise the rejection was not because he was busy, but ‘because he felt obliged to show them that they had asked him to do a thing which was improper’.<sup>119</sup> Published the same year as the *Maitland Mercury* column appeared, the incident reveals that while the social boundaries of afternoon tea were still being configured, these occasions still required the maintenance of social decorum in relationships with the opposite

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<sup>114</sup> Mrs Erskine, *Etiquette in Australia* (Sydney: William Brooks & Co, 1911), p. 38-39.

<sup>115</sup> Wallace, *The etiquette of Australia*, p. 137-138.

<sup>116</sup> *Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser*, 19 September 1891, page 3.

<sup>117</sup> Wallace, *The Etiquette of Australia*, p. 137-138.

<sup>118</sup> *The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser*, 19 September 1891, page 3.

<sup>119</sup> Cambridge, *Three Miss Kings*, p. 45.

sex despite the less formalised setting. These protocols and the rules underlying afternoon tea as a social engagement indicated the very real presence of social boundaries characteristic of the time.

Whilst at an afternoon tea, it was expected that certain behaviour would be observed. Anxieties about this behaviour not being followed are represented in a short story titled 'Afternoon Tea' that appeared in the *Liverpool Herald* in 1898, in which the main character, Mrs. Morohant, host an afternoon tea.<sup>120</sup> Mrs. Morohant feels she has put herself in an awkward situation by inviting the new doctor's wife, Mrs. Denys to her afternoon tea gathering, as Mrs Denys is too 'High Church' for the other guests and her clothes are dowdy, two issues perceived to preventing her easy introduction to the gathering. From the hostess's point of view, successful afternoon teas still require introductions and the hierarchical observance of relationships. As it transpires the afternoon tea unfolds in the style expected of such entertainment – they drink tea and coffee, have bread and butter, cake, and a girl sings and performs on the piano. Mrs Denys feels she has not been properly introduced to many people and so finds limited opportunities for conversation. She later remarks to her husband that she started speaking with the woman sitting next to her despite not having had a proper introduction. As consequence of this discussion, she has such a good conversation she 'shocked some of the prim old ladies with her laughter'. From this incident dramatised in the play, it is clear that certain behaviour relating to formal introductions and acting with propriety were expected to be upheld in theory, and yet through Mrs. Denys it is revealed that within afternoon teas these social rules were not so strictly enforced. Interestingly, the awkwardness in this story reveals more than the fact protocols exist. Here, afternoon tea

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<sup>120</sup> *Liverpool Herald*, 14 May 1898, p. 9.

becomes a setting where deeper social tensions and boundaries regarding religion, appearance and wealth reveal themselves.

In the afternoon tea setting certain social hierarchies existed. Even amongst middle class guests there was recognition of the differences of status which existed across social groupings, and that these differences carried implications for the codified behaviour and interactions that could take place. Young describes the middle class as being a ‘highly stratified body’ who were aware of the ‘minutely refined layers of distinction’ separating them, and distinguished between others of the same ‘stratum’, and those beneath it.<sup>121</sup> These hierarchies could create uncomfortable situations for both the hostess and for guests during social engagements. During the King sisters’ afternoon tea with their neighbour, Mr. Brion, and landlady, Mrs. McIntyre in *The Three Miss Kings*, Mrs Duff-Scott, an upper class matron who had taken on the Miss Kings as her protégés, calls. Upon her entering the room a social awkwardness descends. The eldest sister, Elizabeth, is unsure whether it is the ‘proper thing’ to introduce her guests to each other, thus she only ‘murmured their names’ hesitantly. At the introduction, Mrs. McIntyre ‘made a servile curtsy, unworthy of a daughter of the free country’ to which Mrs. Duff-Scott returns with a ‘slight nod’. Without being asked, Mrs. McIntyre and Mr. Brion ‘departed in haste’.<sup>122</sup> Cambridge’s disdainful judgement of Mrs. McIntyre’s curtsy implies such behaviour was embarrassing, and yet the fact the pair left immediately suggests an acceptance of hierarchical positioning. . Although afternoon tea did not create these rules regarding social hierarchy and social positioning, and they certainly did not exist only within the context of these social gatherings. Afternoon tea nonetheless reflected broader trends across society; and the implicit anxieties regarding social standing and status.

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<sup>121</sup> Young, *Middle Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 14.

<sup>122</sup> Cambridge, *The Three Miss Kings*, pp. 92-93.

Afternoon tea was intimately linked with manners and the notion of good-breeding, and this was communicated through the desire to display good hospitality. Part of the responsibility of the hostess was to ensure her guests had as enjoyable a time as possible. An article appearing in the *Launceston Examiner* in 1895 articulates measures a hostess could take to ensure guests had an engaging and pleasant experience, for instance, encouraging the use of smaller tea-cups, recognising that women would pay several calls over the course of the afternoon. The article encourages a hostess to let her guests add their own milk and sugar, as this would limit disruptions to the pace of the tea pouring and allow other guests to receive their cup of tea quickly. It was also important that the tea service used by each guest was large enough for them to keep their slice of cake on the side of the saucer. With respect to food, it was considered important to ensure that the cakes and biscuits offered were not so crisp as to give off a ‘disagreeable crunching sound’. Finally, hostesses were discouraged from providing sticky food, as it could spoil gloves.<sup>123</sup> Causing damage to gloves seems to be a persistent concern and one of which hostesses were regularly reminded. Elsewhere, the salmon sandwich was praised for having the advantage of not causing glove damage.<sup>124</sup> The extent to which hostesses were encouraged to give consideration to their guests is reflected in a poem appearing in the *Bulletin*. ‘Tea, tea afternoon tea – everyone’s anxious to brew it for me!’<sup>125</sup> – Indeed, this captures the apprehensiveness of hostesses in ensuring they demonstrated appropriate thoughtfulness to their guests.

It was also the hostess’ responsibility to ensure that the refreshment and food selection was refreshing and took guests’ needs into consideration. A feature article that appeared in the ‘Woman’s Corner’ section of the *Brisbane Courier* in 1903 describes the necessity of ensuring the tea was made well. It highlights that it was ‘no longer the fashion to display

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<sup>123</sup> *Launceston Examiner*, 8 October 1895, p. 3.

<sup>124</sup> *Morning Bulletin*, 14 January 1897, p. 3.

<sup>125</sup> *Bulletin*, 14 August 1913, p. 13.

hospitality by the strength of the tea.’ Instead, ‘nine out of ten prefer weak to strong tea.’ Accordingly, it was necessary to add boiling water to the tea after it had been made to soften the flavour.<sup>126</sup> During this period there were discernible shifts in the sort of food that was considered suitable to be served. In 1913 the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared that ‘anyone who serves wafers with tea is lacking in gastronomic imagination’. It reinforced the insult by comparing such an action with the ridiculousness of ‘having a picnic in the woodshed’. The writer went on to praise certain types of sandwiches that were typically offered, while emphasising the need to have them ‘look as attractive as possible’. It was suggested that there was ‘nothing nastier’ than a poorly made sandwich. Of nasty sandwiches, particular offense was taken to those ‘oozing salad-dressing at every pore, and containing, half-concealed, a malicious ‘indivisible lettuce leaf’’. Sandwiches were to be prepared properly to ensure that they did not disrupt the enjoyment of the afternoon tea. They were to be cut so finely that biting was unnecessary, and the lettuce leaf was to be broken into smaller pieces before being applied to the bread.<sup>127</sup> In her discussion on afternoon tea in the *Morning Bulletin* in 1897, the writer ‘Juliet’ drew attention to the potential for all things to ‘run to extremes and to provoke competition and rivalry’. With this in mind, she urged readers to not turn afternoon tea into a competition, for ‘it would be a pity to take from the dainty refinement of this informal meal’.<sup>128</sup> The hostess, then, had to be gracious and seek to put the needs of her guests’ experience above her own desire for recognition and esteem. Through these rather amusing suggestions for hospitality, it is clear that the extensive effort was exerted into maintaining a civilised and elegant experience. It reflects the desire for good manners, enjoyable experiences, and an almost obsessive need to maintain respectability.

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<sup>126</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 28 November 1903, p. 13.

<sup>127</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 December 1913, p. 5.

<sup>128</sup> *Morning Bulletin*, 14 January 1897, p. 3.

This provision of good hospitality required a high degree of work and energy on the part of the hostess. Having a selection of food available which had variety and catered to a constant stream of visiting guests could incur significant expense.<sup>129</sup> The question posed in 1912 by ‘Cornelia’ in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, ‘is afternoon tea a necessary meal or an unnecessary nuisance?’ answered itself by reinforcing the amount of work that was necessary when casual callers came. The ‘pleasure of a friend’s unexpected call’ was discounted as it monopolised the hostess’ own plans for the afternoon, and required that she return to the ‘too-familiar’ kitchen to put the kettle on and prepare the food. Furthermore, ‘when the tea enters the drawing-room it interrupts conversation for no one – not even a woman can talk to advantage as she balances one cup and saucer on her lap and stabs at pieces of cake.’ ‘Cornelia’ suggested that this work could go unappreciated, as people were often not actually hungry or thirsty when they visited at afternoon tea time but merely came to socialise. With the absence of domestic servants, the preparation and clean up resulted in a loss of the hostess’leisure time.<sup>130</sup>

Despite these prescribed protocols, behavioural observances, hierarchies and additional work, afternoon tea was, by and large, an enjoyable and sought-after social engagement which allowed for a relaxed form of socialising. Wallace indicates that ‘to give an afternoon tea is only another way for a woman to say ‘come and see me when you will be sure of finding me at home’,<sup>131</sup> thus removing it from the tedious formalities associated with making calls. Instead, it was a pleasant experience where women developed relationships and strengthened friendships. As demonstrated, hosting an afternoon tea required a considerable amount of effort. However, one of afternoon tea’s primary functions was to provide a comfortable space for women to socialise. In 1888 ‘Moree Bealiba’ asked, ‘how did our grandmothers exist

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<sup>129</sup> *Western Mail*, 30 November 1901, p. 67.

<sup>130</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 1912, p. 5

<sup>131</sup> Wallace, *The etiquette of Australia*, p. 36.

without this most innocent of all bonds of conviviality?’ The absence of afternoon tea would mean the afternoon would be ‘a mere valley of dry bones.’ For her, afternoon tea was a delightful time when friends could visit either ‘casually or by appointment’ and discuss topical events or shared interests. For women, afternoon tea was valued because it was a time without ‘restraint and formality’ as the silver tea service and china brought a sense of ease and cheerfulness to those gathered.<sup>132</sup> The taking of afternoon tea was an important leisure time, which provided a break to the daily tasks and duties which had to be undertaken. To maximise this leisure experience, whilst ensuring afternoon teas remained ‘strictly informal affairs’, some hostesses introduced music or recitations to ‘enliven the proceedings’. In summer, tennis and croquet was played.<sup>133</sup> During afternoon teas women had the freedom to spend their leisure time in conversation or engaged in popular free-time activities.

The notion that afternoon tea was a time in which relationships could be strengthened is further reinforced by the fact it could be a family occasion. Richard Waterhouse highlights that from the turn of the twentieth century, children were invited to join in family recreation instead of being separated from the adults.<sup>134</sup> Afternoon tea provided a space in which intimate family relationships could mature, and where family members could enjoy each other’s company. A 1913 photograph of a family sitting on a veranda at their home in Scone depicts a similar intimate setting. Parents sit having a tea party with their children on the veranda using a children’s miniature tea set. As the father sits, poised to take a sip from his miniature cup and saucer, and the mother tends to the small infant in her lap, it is evident familial bonds were strengthened, the family enjoyed each other’s company, and that the children were actively involved in the occasion. Similarly, In contrast, a photograph taken in a garden at ‘Ecksleigh’ in Brisbane c. 1900 shows three women taking tea while a small girl

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<sup>132</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June 1888, page 7.

<sup>133</sup> *Western Mail*, 26 March 1897, p. 37.

<sup>134</sup> Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid*, p. 115.

sits on quietly beside them. In a social arrangement designed for the women's amusement, the girl's presence indicates that children were an accepted component of their mother's afternoon tea experience. In this way, regardless of whether children were engaged in the experience or simply present, family and afternoon tea were compatible.

Afternoon tea could not be disassociated from the material goods that comprised the experience. The teapots, teacups and saucers, sugar pot, tea tray and table were all necessary facets of the social custom, and reflected middle class wealth. As well as the silver service, fine china was also popular for tea drinking. The complexity and quality of china and porcelain is discussed in Cambridge's *The Three Miss Kings* between the eldest sister Elizabeth and the husband of their esteemed companion Mrs. Duff-Scott, referred to as 'the Major'. Although Elizabeth confesses at the beginning that she knows nothing about china, the Major insists on questioning her knowledge. He alleges 'You don't know the different between Chelsea and Derby-Chelsea, for instance?', 'Nor between old Majolica and modern?', 'Nor between Limoges enamel of the sixteenth century... and what they call Limoges now-a-days?' And finally 'you *do* know Sevres and Dresden when you see them? – you could tell one of *them* from each other?' Each time Elizabeth replies no until, 'beginning to blush for her surpassing ignorance' she feels compelled to apologise profusely for it.<sup>135</sup> This excerpt highlights two important aspects: firstly, the extensive variety and brands of china available; and secondly, that the Major could list each type suggests that it was not only of interest to women but appealed more broadly to people of a certain social standing. Yet this conversation is about more than china. The china provides an avenue for explicating deeper social tensions. Through his incessant questioning, bordering on rudeness, the Major is set on exposing Elizabeth's ignorance. She is forced into a position of embarrassment for not

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<sup>135</sup> Cambridge, *The Three Miss Kings*, p. 109.

possessing the knowledge expected of her. The china, then, is given a human dynamic in communicating how these material goods did not just exist in isolation in the comfort of the domestic but were markers of status in the commercial world.

The 1903 photograph taken at 'Millera' station successfully captured the multifaceted nature of afternoon tea taken at home. In this tableau we can discern that afternoon tea was largely enjoyed by women, although men played a part, and middle class wealth manifested itself in the material goods shown. The photograph encapsulates both the elegance and refinement of the ritual, and the 'everydayness' of the experience. Originating in England, afternoon tea soon occupied an important place in the Australian social rituals. It served a different function from other social engagements, balancing an understanding of social propriety and hierarchical relationships with gossip and daintiness, and accordingly revealed certain perceptions regarding leisure and hospitality. Certain material goods were necessary for the experience to exist. These goods created modes of differentiation to provide clear markers of social standing in a society moving increasingly towards egalitarianism. Accordingly, afternoon tea in domestic life required an intersection of social relationships, status, hospitality, leisure and material goods to exist in its popular form.

## Chapter Three: The Commercialisation of Afternoon Tea

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‘This is my proposal – that we open a tearoom – a sort of refined little restaurant for quiet people...’<sup>136</sup> This suggestion, by the confident and pretty protagonist Jenny Liddon of Ada Cambridge’s 1896 novel *A Humble Enterprise*, was one that ultimately changed her life. Made in response to her family’s unfortunate need for an income following the untimely death of her father, it allowed the Liddons to both invest wisely the limited money they had left, and stay together as a family unit. The nature of the tearoom was quickly decided upon: it would be ‘a woman’s place, that men would not think of coming to except to bring women’; its decor would be such that it would be ‘like a comfortable private sitting room, only not so crowded,’ and most importantly, on the menu would be ‘just tea and coffee and scones – perhaps some little cakes – nothing perishable or messy; perhaps some delicate sandwiches, so that ladies can take lunch.’<sup>137</sup>

Through the character of Jenny and her family’s new business, Ada Cambridge captures the popular appeal of tearooms for both entrepreneurs and the clientele that frequented them, and comments on the interplay of tearooms with work, gender and respectability. Emerging in the 1880s and gaining popularity at the turn of the twentieth century, the tearoom responded to shifting patterns of modernity amongst its contemporary society. The ritualisation of tea drinking moved beyond the privacy and intimacy of the home and extended into the public forum. However, rather than rival the rituals associated with afternoon tea in domestic life, tearooms catered to a different need and served a different role in society. Tearooms reconfigured the geographical space of the cities by introducing a social presence to a

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<sup>136</sup> Ada Cambridge, *A Humble Enterprise*, (London; Melbourne: Ward, Lock, 1896), p. 19.

<sup>137</sup> Cambridge, *A Humble Enterprise*, p. 20.

predominantly masculine business hub, and shifting the consumption of food and drink in public; as such they provide a fascinating counterpoint to traditional domesticity.

Originally, tearooms were closely connected with the practice of tea drinking, evident in *A Humble Enterprise* when Jenny highlights the centrality of tea and the accompanying scones in ensuring the business's success (at Jenny's suggestion that her mother make the scones, 'Mrs. Liddon smiled. She saw at once that her scones alone would make the tea-room famous.'<sup>138</sup>). Gradually over time this focus shifted and tearooms became associated with more than simply being places where tea and other refreshments were served. Instead, they came to represent commercialisation, sociability and romance. This chapter will explore each of these three associations and consider the position tearooms occupied in Australian public life.

Tearooms existed as part of the broader economic framework of the British Empire, and were key markers attesting to the success of the imperial tea trade. Tearooms reinforced the larger colonial presence amongst Australian society and indicated the total integration of elements of both the British tea trade and the fashionable practice of tea drinking in public – although tearooms responded to the demands of Australian society, they also in actual fact responded to British societal changes. Jane Pettigrew highlights that following the emergence of the Temperance movement in England in the 1840s, temperance eateries and coffee houses were established to create an alternative to the public houses. These enterprises proved quite popular and established a tradition of drinking non-alcoholic beverages in public.<sup>139</sup> It was in Glasgow that the first tearoom was opened in the early 1870s. In a tea shop run with his sister Catherine, Stuart Cranston offered customers free samples of his tea wares. The success of

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<sup>138</sup> Cambridge, *A Humble Enterprise*, p. 21.

<sup>139</sup> Pettigrew, *A Social History of Tea*, p. 134.

this idea meant that he introduced seating into his shop. Customers were charged two pence for a tea sample, and encouraged to take it with bread and cake for a small additional price.<sup>140</sup> Catherine decided to open her own tearoom, and she soon expanded with several tearooms opening across Glasgow. Two of the initial motivating factors for Catherine were that tearooms were ‘counter-attractions to gin-shops’, assisting the Temperance cause by offering a different beverages in alcohol-free areas. They also provided ‘both the social need and the commercial possibilities of something more than a mere restaurant.’<sup>141</sup>

It was only in the following decade that England began to develop a tearoom culture. According to Pettigrew, the first tearoom opened in London in 1884 at the Aerated Bread Company when a manageress converted a spare room at the back of her bakery for this purpose. The 1890s saw a proliferation of similar tea shop chains not just through London but throughout England. Names such as Lockharts, Express Dairy, Kardomah and Lyons became synonymous with popular tearooms.<sup>142</sup> The emergence of tearooms in Australia correlated with these developments that were being made across the British world. Sydney had developed its own public tea drinking culture within ten years of Cranston’s 1875 tearoom.<sup>143</sup> However, unlike in Great Britain, Sydney’s tearooms were not deliberate attempts to assist the Temperance movement, or to expand existing bakery business. The notion that tea was profitable as more than a mere commodity was a new one. The taking of tea in public quickly became a popular activity, and a proliferation of small businesses emerged that capitalised on the appeal of this experience.

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<sup>140</sup> Pettigrew, *A Social History of Tea*, p. 136.

<sup>141</sup> Cynthia Brandimarte, ‘To Make the Whole World Homelike: Gender, Space and America’s Tearoom Movement’, *Winterthur Portfolio*, 30, no. 1 (Spring 2001), p. 2.

<sup>142</sup> Pettigrew, *A Social History of Tea*, p. 134.

<sup>142</sup> Brandimarte, ‘To Make the Whole World Homelike’, p. 2.

<sup>143</sup> Michael Symons, *One Continuous Picnic*, p. 94.

The interconnectedness of the tea trade and tearoom commercial opportunities in Australia was most pronounced in the business transactions of Quong Tart. Born in Canton, China, and moving to Australia's goldfields as a child, Tart was brought up by a Scottish family and thus understood the 'British' way of life as well as being intimately connected with the country from which he obtained his tea. Accepted as perhaps the most influential of 'Australasian Chinamen'<sup>144</sup>, Tart occupied a prominent and respected position in public life. It was said that he was 'as well known as the Governor himself', and indeed through his tearooms he had a relationship with Governor Henry Brand, as well as mayors and alderman of the city, and members of parliament.<sup>145</sup> As a Sydney proprietor, Tart played an important role in maintaining positive Chinese – Australian relations, both domestically and internationally.<sup>146</sup> The New South Wales Government made him a member of two commissions into disorderly Chinese conduct in the goldfields and in Sydney,<sup>147</sup> and he acted as a mediator during a period of intense anti-Chinese agitation in New South Wales in 1888.<sup>148</sup> Tart was vocal in advocating Chinese trade,<sup>149</sup> and China used his services to act as an adviser in disputes, and he was rewarded by the Emperor who made him a 'mandarin of the fifth rank, crystal button'.<sup>150</sup> Tart's Chinese-Australian heritage meant that his tearooms achieved a unique balance between Chinese culture and that of traditional Britishness.

Tart was largely responsible for the successful transfer of the culture of elegance associated with the tearoom from Britain to Australia. He actively sought to imitate ideas surrounding

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<sup>144</sup> *Kalgoorlie Western Argus*, 9 August 1900, p. 2.

<sup>145</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1898, p. 5.

<sup>146</sup> Two domestic examples include his membership of the Lin Yik Society, founded in 1893 by Chinese Merchants to represent the interests of the Chinese within New South Wales (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 July 1903, p. 6.) and was involved in the 'Annual Chinese Meeting' that fostered a connection between the Church of England Chinese Mission with Chinese brethren and was 'the biggest tea meeting in Sydney' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 July 1891, p. 11.).

<sup>147</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 December 1894, p. 9.

<sup>148</sup> *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 1 December 1888, p. 3.

<sup>149</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1898, p. 5.

<sup>150</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 July 1903, p. 6.

table decorations, presentation and service. Anonymous material from the J. Lyons & Co (Limited) archives in England describes reasons behind the success of their tearooms, including the fact that ‘the new white and gold tea shops with their uniformed and attractive waitresses shone forth in a London drab with drinking dens [and] dingy coffee houses.’<sup>151</sup> Likewise, Tart’s tearooms offered beauty, solace and respite in the hustle and grime of city life. This meant that ‘people from the country did not consider their visit to Sydney complete without at least one visit.’<sup>152</sup> Tart decorated his rooms with white tablecloths as in Britain, but added distinctively ‘oriental’ features using ‘fretted woodwork, gilded and coloured’, he selected his lighting to ‘shed a mysterious glamour’, and only used Chinese cups and saucers.<sup>153</sup> Colin Bannerman has suggested Tart decorated his rooms with ferneries, gold carp fish ponds and fans to intentionally ‘create a ‘celestial’ atmosphere’.<sup>154</sup> Despite his decision to pay homage to Chinese culture, by 1888 Tart had only employed one Chinese worker.<sup>155</sup> This is particularly interesting because it highlights the societal tension of finding goods from exotic China appealing, while still maintaining the racist attitudes against Chinese workers. In Tart’s rooms, the ‘oriental’ was enjoyed because British food and service prevailed.

Tart’s businesses were quickly replicated across the country, and were thus instrumental in establishing a strong tearoom culture. The success of this commercialisation meant that by the early twentieth century tearooms had etched themselves into the urban landscape. In 1903 the *Brisbane Courier* declared that ‘tearooms abound on every-side [of the city] it is difficult to say where they are not’.<sup>156</sup> Jill Matthews argues that during this time Sydney

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<sup>151</sup> As cited in Pettigew, *A Social History of Tea*, p. 135.

<sup>152</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 1926, p. 6.

<sup>153</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 1926, p. 6.

<sup>154</sup> Bannerman, *A Friend in the Kitchen*, p. 63.

<sup>155</sup> *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 1 December 1888, p. 3.

<sup>156</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 28 November 1903, p. 13.

embodied romance, cosmopolitan pleasures and modernity.<sup>157</sup> As society evolved and embraced the modern era during the early twentieth century, so too did these establishments, and they themselves became sites of modernity and cosmopolitanism. The tearoom in Australia became an identifiable symbol of modernity as it embraced technological advancements and new ideas in decor, becoming an appealing and attractive place to be seen. An article that appeared in *The Register*, 1908, captured the modernity of tearooms, by looking specifically at Miers, which had become ‘the most up-to-date and comfortable tearoom’ in South Australia. The first floor alone had a capacity of three hundred and fifty people, in a room ‘tastefully done in white enamel’ with ‘green inlaid linoleum’ flooring, and the balcony seating an additional eighty people. The tearoom had a ‘boiling water urn, automatically heated and supplied with fresh water’ and goods were ‘displayed on a glittering array of electroplate stands’. As well as this, it had novelties in the form of lifts – used to transport food and for visitor usage. It featured an allocated smoking room for gentleman usage. Finally, large mirrors were widely used and commended for brightening up the room and atmosphere.<sup>158</sup> Visiting Miers was about much more than taking refreshments - it was very much a destination in itself. Appealing to both genders with its many aesthetically appealing features, it capitalised on the most up-to-date aspects of industrialisation with its lifts and hot water facilities to epitomise the ideals of modernity. Its extensive seating capacity and modernised setting ultimately confirmed the wide-spread popularity of tearooms as places to frequent and enjoy.

Much of the appeal of tearooms in the twentieth century was that they were sophisticated and enticing places to relax and to engage with the cosmopolitan world. Visiting a tearoom was about the nature of the experience offered and the manner in which people could socialise

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<sup>157</sup> Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance hall and picture palace: Sydney's romance with modernity* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>158</sup> *The Register*, 16 April 1908, p. 3.

and enjoy their leisure time. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported in 1910 that a tearoom had been opened on the roof of the tallest building in the city of Hobart. There, tea and scones were served ‘under the open sky’ in an area filled with flowers that created ‘gorgeous masses of colour on which the eye can feast.’ The article declared ‘there is something very soul-satisfying in the meals in the open in sight of a beautiful scene.’<sup>159</sup> Likewise, a rooftop tearoom was opened in 1912 atop the new six storey Boan Bros building in Perth. This building itself was considered to be ‘the finest shop in the Commonwealth’, and the tearoom received much acclaim as a result of its associations with it. The tearoom was described as having a ‘great number of small tables, taxed to their utmost, and busy attendants very fresh and smart-looking, all in white,’ and commended for the ‘great views of Perth’ available.<sup>160</sup> The appeal of this tearoom was first in its very location, being the most fashionable site in town, and second in its provision of views of the city which offered patrons a unique experience. The appeal of the Miers and Boan Bros tearooms lay in the innovative sophistication that they offered. Their locations were noteworthy as it was not just about the single entity of the tearoom itself, but the associations with the modern buildings they was attached too. Moreover, as rooftop tearooms, they were able to offer patrons an innovative experience that quite literally immersed them in the thriving metropolis, offering a high degree of exhibitionism. Tearooms such as these were popular as they could provide opportunities to socialise, drink tea and enjoy dainty food in a unique and aesthetically pleasing context.

However, tearooms did not always fully enjoy the cosmopolitan ideals that were often associated with them. As commercial enterprises they were faced with the challenges of and difficulties that arose in the modern age, and this affected for owners and clientele. Letters of

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<sup>159</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March 1910, p. 5.

<sup>160</sup> *Western Mail*, 15 November, 1912, p. 42.

complaint directed to the Sydney Town Clerk in the early twentieth century reveal some of the perplexing and unpleasant experiences of proprietors<sup>161</sup>. Cleanliness was of particular concern for some owners. In 1903 Miss May Shaw of the Merchantile Luncheon and Tearooms complained that the Council's street sweepings were just being disposed at her door; despite the fact there was 'absolutely no cart traffic' outside her rooms, to the distress of herself and her customers. In his reply letter, the City Surveyor assured Miss Shaw that 'the boys have been instructed not to heap up manure' in front of her tearooms. Similarly, Miss Chudleigh complained in 1910 that a week had passed without rubbish collection from her rooms on George Street, and it was affecting her business. Another issue dealt with by the Town Clerk related to lease and regulation arrangements. In 1910 Mrs Dutton sought to finish up her lease early. She explained in a letter that she was experiencing problems attracting business because her tearooms were located too far from the commercial centre of Hay Street markets, and another tearoom had just opened up closer that was taking potential customers. Her request was denied. In a different vein, A. H. Cimbear of Glenrock Tearooms sought an extension of time on a request the council had made in 1911 to replace his chimney as it was causing smoke and soot nuisances. He said he needed this time as his business was 'faltering' and he couldn't afford it to be publically known he had been disobeying laws regarding public health. Although seemingly an eclectic mix of complaints, these reveal some of the various difficulties faced by tearoom owners at the turn of the twentieth century. They indicate that while the interior of some tearooms may have been glamorous, these businesses were nonetheless faced with the vicissitudes and commercial realities of the modern world.

The difficulties and often harsh realities of the operating of tearooms also affected the customers that frequented them. A short story appearing in *The Bulletin* provided insight into

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<sup>161</sup> All material from the City of Sydney Archives. A complete reference for these sources can be found in the bibliography.

a mismanaged business.<sup>162</sup> A man entered into a shop to buy some cheese, and while doing so the owner alerted him to the new tearoom he had opened at the back of his store. Motivated by curiosity, the customer decided to explore its potential. In there, he was exposed to an establishment that had a ‘gloomy’ atmosphere, was entirely ‘deserted’, and victim to the ‘hissing and spluttering’ of an ‘angry kerosene stove’. Against his better judgement, he ‘waited to be discovered’ so as to have a cup of tea. When he was finally found by the tearoom waitress he learnt she had been ‘doing practically nothing’ all day. Although the plot progressed to comment on the precarious nature of marriage, it nonetheless reveals certain operational difficulties in running tearooms. In some instances, they could be poorly designed, unaesthetically appealing and inadequately managed. That it was located at the back of the store suggests that it was often assumed that tearooms could be managed by anyone, anywhere, with a desire for profit overshadowing any concern from quality customer service. People often had negative experiences in tearooms due to the behaviour of other patrons, rather than from dissatisfaction with the establishment. This is highlighted in a letter sent to the Town Clerk a man complained about his experience at a tearoom. On his way to sit at a particular table, a woman interrupted him to say the seats were already engaged and then ‘proceeded to place all the chairs at that table on end so that they should not be occupied’. The Town Clerk replied that the council couldn’t interfere in private business decisions, but highlighted that he was aware that it was practice for some establishments to give consideration to their regular customers and allowed them to ‘always occupy the same seat.’<sup>163</sup> As with other commercial enterprises, tearooms faced the same difficulties as was common to most businesses: coping with the idiosyncrasies and irrationality of the general public as people from different backgrounds and social standing came together. Despite these difficulties, tearooms became viable business enterprises by the twentieth century which

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<sup>162</sup> *The Bulletin*, 24 August 1911, p. 43-44.

<sup>163</sup> City of Sydney Archives, refer to bibliography.

successfully profited from the interplay of the commercial tea trade and of certain modern and cosmopolitan ideals.

Tearooms became important social spaces which provided a forum for women to interact, engage socially and move freely. Russell describes some city spaces as being places of spectacle, to 'see and be seen' that marked a 'social world',<sup>164</sup> and tearooms provide an example of one such notable space. Despite being located in the metropolis, the associations of tea with domesticity and femininity meant that the tearoom became an identifiable site of respectability and therefore an appropriate setting for women to engage with. This provision of an acceptable space for women served as an appropriate alternative to the popular public houses of Australia's masculine drinking culture. For the duration of Australian history, the pub has been at the heart of the national narrative as it was the centre of social interactions and entertainment.<sup>165</sup> Yet during this period women were excluded from socialising in this setting. Although Diane Kirkby et al suggest that women frequented pubs as customers, they also posit that the pub reflected societal social and cultural values,<sup>166</sup> and Grimshaw et al argue that these values were dominated by a 'colonial masculinity',<sup>167</sup> that favoured patriarchal power systems. Indeed, Waterhouse contends that while 'respectable' women may have attended a function at a Grand Hotel, they would not have visited ordinary pubs. These 'centres of male sub-culture were dominated by working class men socialising and drinking',<sup>168</sup> thereby it seems unlikely that women were welcomed into this somewhat uncouth culture. In her discussion regarding such pub culture, Valerie Hey discusses how one of the first lessons of social conditioning for men is their ability to command and control space. She cites Shirley Ardener in her argument, who states that any space where men are

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<sup>164</sup> Russell, *A Wish for Distinction*, p. 271.

<sup>165</sup> Kirkby, Diane, *The Australian Pub* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), p. 21.

<sup>166</sup> Kirkby, Diane, *The Australian Pub* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), p. 24.

<sup>167</sup> Grimshaw, P, Lake, M., McGrath, A., Quartly, M, *Creating a nation* (Ringwood: Penguin books, 1996), p. 114.

<sup>168</sup> Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure*, p. 81.

present in larger numbers becomes designated as ‘public’ and simultaneously ‘out of bounds for women’.<sup>169</sup> As a result, men territorially claimed not just the pub, but most urban space for their own consumption. In stark contrast, tearooms occupied a unique position in public space because they welcomed and encouraged female clientele in urban cities that traditionally discouraged women’s independent presence, they normalised their social needs and provided pleasurable experiences. They were spaces where women could enjoy female company, Pettigrew contends, without the accompaniment of their father or husband.<sup>170</sup> Within the regulated social space of these tearooms there was a heightened sense of possibility and real opportunity for women.

The social space within the tearoom was important for developing and strengthening relationships. Patrons visited tearooms in their leisure time as it was an important meeting point for maintaining friendships. Establishments like Miers, and Quong Tart’s tearooms created specialised women’s rooms to deliver a tailored service to their female clientele. This became the normal practice for tearoom culture. For example, a tearoom that opened in Adelaide, 1900 featured ‘a spacious tearoom for ladies with their gentleman friends, and on the same floor is a ladies boudoir.’<sup>171</sup> This recognised that while tearooms were open to both genders, it was very much specialised towards its female clientele. For women in particular, tearooms were a space to socialise and gossip in private, with the implication of the Adelaide tearoom being that men would only be privy to these conversations if specifically invited. The brand Robur Tea capitalised on this in an advertising campaign during 1911. This featured the ‘testimonial’ of a waitress who said that people visited tearooms for the inseparable combination of ‘tea and gossip’, and that ‘the latest gossip... would make your

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<sup>169</sup>Valerie Hey, *Patriarchy and Pub Culture* (London: Tavistock, 1986), p. 5.

<sup>170</sup> Pettigrew, *A Social History of Tea*, p. 136.

<sup>171</sup> *South Australian Registar*, 22 September 1900, p. 11.

hair stand on end.’<sup>172</sup> Although designed with the intention of selling a particular product, these advertisements indicate the centrality of talk within the tearoom experience. In some instances, tearooms were involved in small ways with the suffrage movement and advances for women. In 1900 the *Kalgoorlie Western Argus* reported that a ‘lively and pretentious’ fight had emerged over women’s franchise in the Perth, and as consequence, petitions both for and against the movement were to be ‘signed in every suburb and almost every tearoom in the city’.<sup>173</sup> In such a setting, women could socialise, and conduct their business in private without having the possibility of interruption, as could be the case with meeting in domestic life.

As an acceptable social space for women, tearooms were likewise considered respectable places to work and as such, reveal information regarding the nature of labour relations in this period. The *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* recounted a story in 1906 about how an Englishwoman hired an Australian domestic servant ‘in the shape of a pleasant, inexperienced girl’ and trained her up to be a ‘splendid waitress and obliging attendant’. However, to the Englishwoman’s dismay, the girl gave notice at the end of her training, choosing instead to pursue a career in the tearooms. Her attempts to find employment in this business were unsuccessful. She was rejected from the first tearoom she applied for because of their being 150 other applications for the position. At the second tearoom she was likewise rejected as ‘400 girls were waiting, or rather, waiting to wait’.<sup>174</sup> It is difficult to determine whether this story was an anecdotal reflection on the state of domestic labour, or a true depiction into the excessive number of women seeking employment within this industry. Nonetheless it strongly indicates the popularity associated with being a tearoom waitress,

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<sup>172</sup> Advertisements of this nature appeared regularly throughout the year in the *Sunday Times*. Examples include: *Sunday Times* 26 March 1911; *Sunday Times* 23 April 1911.

<sup>173</sup> *Kalgoorlie Western Argus*, 9 August 1900, p. 37.

<sup>174</sup> *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 23 June 1906, p. 7.

popularly known as a 'tearoom girl'. Another reason contributing to its popularity was the rate of pay offered. This was discussed in an article appearing in the *Barrier Miner* in 1901. Originally, the writer was disgruntled by the industry pay rates that offered in Melbourne tearooms which began at '6 s, per week, and... go up to 10 s, a week.' Yet the article acknowledged that despite gender inequalities of pay, waitressing in tearooms provided a stable income.<sup>175</sup> One of the benefits of waitressing in the tearooms was that no age limit was imposed on workers, so that a woman could work as a waitress at the same tearoom for up to twenty years.<sup>176</sup> Despite the discontent regarding gender difference, this industry paid comparatively well and offered a high degree of job security, thus contributing to the position's popularity.

It was considered respectable for a woman to not only work in, but to manage her own tearoom. In America, tearooms were spaces where middle-class women could be comfortable working in public, and where society accepted that they were capable of earning a living.<sup>177</sup> Similarly in Australia, tearooms enabled women to engage with the highly gendered business world. It was this assured respectability that allowed Jenny Liddon and her family in *A Humble Enterprise* to open up their own tearooms in Little Collins Street, Melbourne. The acceptability of such a career was exemplified in the 'Mikado' tearoom that opened in Sydney, with Miss Edith Hawker as directress. Mikado became, in part, a ladies club, in which members 'had certain privileges over the general public'. A room was set aside for their own usage, even after the tearoom was closed, and they also had free access to the tearoom's 'novelty' bike racks, free of charge. The opening ceremony was a grand affair, and the room's central decoration was a large Japanese umbrella suspended from the roof with

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<sup>175</sup> *Barrier Miner*, 13 February 1909, p. 3.

<sup>176</sup> *The Argus*, 25 August 1914, p. 4.

<sup>177</sup> Brandimarte, 'To Make the Whole World Homelike', p. 1.

<sup>177</sup> Symons, *One Continuous Picnic*, p. 94.

Japanese ribbons, surrounded by daffodils and other flowers. The room was opened with an ‘amusing speech’ on ‘tea, Japan and the New Woman’.<sup>178</sup> Coming from a respected and wealthy family, Miss Hawker did not need the economic security. The bike rack, the after-hours accessibility and the opulent decor attests not only to the success of the business, but its positioning as a modern and progressive establishment that demonstrated women’s capabilities as entrepreneurs. Within this particular commercial enterprise, women were recognised as bringing respectability and aptitude to their work. This was reflected in the suggestion that was made regarding the introduction of rooftop tearooms to Sydney. Following the success of the Hobart rooftop tearoom which has been previously discussed, Sydney was encouraged to adopt a similar model as there were several suitable buildings that would serve as ideal real estate. The *Sydney Morning Herald* suggested that ‘the woman who is enterprising enough to open [the tearoom] will meet with success’.<sup>179</sup> The automatic assumption that a woman would be an ideal owner confirms the radical social acceptance of women in this particular facet of the business world.

Finally, the tearoom during this period embodied the popular ideas of romance and marital happiness. A prevailing association of the tearoom was that it was the ideal setting for relationships between tearoom waitresses and men of the public to blossom. This motion was perpetuated in the press by the types of stories relating to tearoom romances that went to print. In the *Examiner*, 1905, a story appeared recounting an international romance where an affluent gentleman from Calcutta visited Dundee, Scotland, and fell in love with the waitress who served him in a tearoom. Upon returning home, he wrote to her, and ‘the girl in the tearoom was one day astonished to receive by post an offer of his heart and his hand from her far-away admirer’. The girl accepted on the proviso that he move to Scotland, which he did,

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<sup>178</sup> *The Advertiser*, 8 September 1896, p. 5.

<sup>179</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March 1910, p. 5.

and so preparations began for their wedding.<sup>180</sup> Similarly, in Australia, a wedding announcement was made for Miss. Madge Hall and Dr. R.H. Jones in the *Sunday Times*, 1912. After the unfortunate death of her father, Madge moved from Scone to Sydney to work at the Allora Tearoom on Pitt-Street. Although ‘she had many admirers’, it was the advances of the ‘well-known Macquarie Street medico’ that she accepted.<sup>181</sup> Throughout this period it was common for such love stories to feature in the press across the British world. Thus, the tearoom became an opportune site where tearoom girls could meet eligible wealthy men of high social standing that they might not have otherwise come into contact with, capitalising on the idea that love overcame social boundaries. The emphasis on the groom’s fortune, in these stories, only further highlighted the possibility of tearoom romance to rescue the tearoom girl from her lowly circumstances.

It was considered quite natural that tearoom romances should occur during this period. By 1914 it was widely known that ‘teashop girls have many opportunities of meeting young men and a large proportion get married’.<sup>182</sup> As the precedence of tearoom girls meeting their future partner in their places of work became more widely known, it often became the implicit assumption that many young women entered the industry with the hope of finding a husband. Yet it was not just the setting of the tearoom, but of the tearoom girls themselves that was enticing. In an article appearing in 1909, the writer suggested that a woman’s occupation had implications for her marriage prospects. Unlike dressmakers and milliners, it suggested that waitresses and tearoom girls, ‘rarely remained long unmarried, for they are able to administer creature comforts as well as little attentions, which are very welcome and

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<sup>180</sup> *Examiner*, 8 December 1905, p. 6.

<sup>181</sup> *Sunday Times*, 18 August 1912, p.2.

<sup>182</sup> *The Argus*, 25 August 1914, p. 4.

attractive to young men on the lookout for a wife.’<sup>183</sup> Tearoom girls were identified as being nurturing and considerate, thus contributing to their appeal as a prospective wife for patrons.

This association between romance and the tearoom was transposed into the theatre for public consumption. That this reality should be depicted on stage is indicative of the fascination this type of relationship had with contemporary audiences. Its popular appeal suggests it was a theme that resonated with society. William Moore’s 1910 ‘The Tearoom Girl’ provides an example of this.<sup>184</sup> Set in Melbourne, the plot centred on ‘Jones’ and his quest to find the girl he once loved but who had fallen into obscurity following her father’s bankruptcy. All he had heard was that she became a tearoom girl, making her one of the many ‘who have taken up the burden of the tray’. The characters speak of tearoom romances, suggesting the regularity of their occurrence by the comment ‘they tell me some very good matches have been made by stray glances over tea cups’.<sup>185</sup> ‘The play dramatically concludes with the revelation that the tearoom Jones has come into to tell his companions the story of his lost love, is the very same one where she now works, and as the pair are united, marriage is promised. ‘The Tearoom Girl’ can be thought of as capturing a response to popular ideas relating to romance at the time. Like the widespread nature of newspaper love stories, the play pandered to romantic imaginings that love would always prevail, and that regardless of circumstances, girls could aspire to a life of contentment. These notions regarding romance reflected a societal shift in understandings of love and marital arrangements. Marilyn Lake argues that marriage in the nineteenth century involved an exchange between the enjoyment of conjugal rights by the husband and the prominence of maintenance for wives.<sup>186</sup> This shifted, however,

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<sup>183</sup> *Barrier Miner*, 10 July 1909, p. 6.

<sup>184</sup> William Moore, *The Tearoom Girl* (Melbourne: Lothian, 1910).

<sup>185</sup> Moore, *The Tearoom Girl*, p. 33.

<sup>186</sup> Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: the History of Australian Feminism* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999), p. 19.

by the turn of the twentieth century, as the marriage relationship became associated with personal fulfilment.<sup>187</sup> The appeal of the tearoom romance was that it embodied this shift.

However, such ‘romance’ was not the only pursuit of tearoom girls, they aspired to much more than just marriage, despite this being the general assumption expressed in the press. The marriage question was disregarded by a member of the Association of Waitresses. She stated that ‘you may not believe it, but many waitresses have ambition. I know quite a number of girls who are sufficiently in love with their work... It is hard work, but there is plenty of variety in it. I daresay some girls marry customers, but I think you will find most waitresses regard their work quite seriously.’<sup>188</sup> Women’s attitude towards employment was explored in Moore’s ‘The Tearoom girl’. Whilst the assumption existed that it was a ‘burden’ to be a waitress, this was later challenged. The observation by Jones’ companion that ‘the tearoom has a certain fascination for well-bred girls... it’s a case of excitement and twelve shillings a week versus domesticity and dullness’<sup>189</sup> underscores the enjoyment some women took from their work. Working as a tearoom girl had the potential to offer a form of escapism from the traditional expectations of the middle class home and marriage responsibilities. Some tearoom girls, then, enjoyed the autonomy provided by work, and subsequently became more interested in pursuing a career than marriage.

Moreover, while relationships may have been formed in the tearooms, they were not always inherently romantic. As demonstrated through a poem appearing in *The Bulletin*, 1910,<sup>190</sup> gestures in the name of romance were not always welcome, and certainly not actively sought. Written by ‘Victoria, Kettledrum’, the poem addresses the fact that tearooms perpetuated an

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<sup>187</sup> Carol Bacci, ‘Feminism and the “eroticization” of the middle-class woman: The intersection of class and gender attitudes’ *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 11, no. 1, p. 45.

<sup>188</sup> *The Argus*, 25 August 1914, p. 4.

<sup>189</sup> Moore, *The Tearoom Girl*, p. 33.

<sup>190</sup> *Bulletin*, 23 June 1910, p 44.

appearance of respectability, 'It's so genteel in a tea-room, and a girl looks pretty in white.' Yet she reveals this to be a facade in her lament that 'nobody knows our troubles – I don't think anyone cares, except to wonder why tea-girls assume such wonderful airs'. The troubles that she speaks of goes beyond the busyness of work, as she must also contend with unwanted advances by many of the male patrons, from 'clerks, and the boys from the college, and the leering business men who call me 'dolly' and 'girlie' and murmur 'see you again!''.

The poem references a particular man who is aggressive in his pursuit of her. To his sexual advances her response was 'all that is clean within me revolts at his loathsome wink'. She knows that she shares the label 'a tearoom tart', but declares that is not in her nature. The melancholic tone of the poem indicates her unhappiness at the position she is regularly put in with respect to her interactions with men. It discredits the prevailing 'romance' connotations of the tearooms as love is replaced with sexual encounters.

Yet for some tearoom girls, marital happiness was not what they desired. The sexual advances rejected by 'Victoria' were readily embraced by her co-workers. Angela Woolcott suggests that by the 1920s, women had begun to define themselves as sexual objects with financial and social autonomy.<sup>191</sup> The tearoom girl provides an example of this emerging sexual identification. 'Victoria' makes reference to other waitresses 'who are pleased enough to help him play with his money, so long as he's 'not too rough!'' The 'not too rough' euphemistically comments on the sexual behaviour of some women, who were willing participants if it meant the use of the man's finances for their own gain. This combination of independence, sexuality and consumerist desires is early precedent for the lifestyle of the flappers of the following decade.<sup>192</sup> The reputation of some women as a 'tearoom tart'

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<sup>191</sup>Woolcott, *To try her fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 197.

<sup>192</sup>G. Reekie, 'Decently Dressed? Sexualised Consumerism and the Working Woman's Wardrobe', *Labour History*, 61 (1991), p. 42.

highlights the tension that existed between women who were suitable potential wives and women who exercised sexual freedoms. This sexual facet of the tearoom girl identity further discredits the notion women became tearoom girls in the pursuit of marital security. The notion of the romance of the tearoom was a complex one. While it reflected the reality that relationships did emerge within the space of the tearoom, the associations with love and marriage was not reflected in all interactions between men and women of the period. Despite this complexity, the romance prevailed in societal popular imaginings.

Emerging in the late nineteenth century, and gaining momentum in the early twentieth century, tearooms introduced the ritualisation of tea drinking into the Australian public forum. Tearooms existed as part of the broader economic framework of the British world, and demonstrated the interconnectedness of the empire by marking the success of the imperial tea trade on one hand, and the elegant British culture of the tearoom on the other. As commercial enterprises, they embodied both modernity and cosmopolitanism. Despite the challenges that came with tearooms, they provided sophisticated experiences that people eagerly sought during their leisure time. In particular, they became important sites for women to interact and socialise that provided an alternative to Australia's masculine pub culture. They also provided women with employment opportunities, both as a tearoom girl and as a directress. Moreover, tearooms embodied popular ideas of romance and marital happiness, although this was complicated by emerging female independence. Tearooms responded to shifting patterns of modernity and introduced a dynamic social space into the city landscape.

## Conclusion

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Australia's love affair with tea was layered with complexity, balancing glamour with pragmatism, affection with anxiety. Australians embraced tea with a reckless abandon that bordered on dangerous obsession and developed a tea drinking culture unrivalled almost anywhere in the western world. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, tea permeated the everyday lives of all Australians, male or female, urban or rural. The substance of tea was a symbol of the British empire, and its widespread consumption attested to the success of empire's expansion and the extent of imperial influence over colonial everyday life. Although afternoon tea responded to the traditions associated with the precedent of British afternoon tea, in Australia this ritual changed. A tension developed between the act of drinking the commodity of tea, and the experience of afternoon tea as a ritualised break and social event of significance.

Afternoon tea within domestic life was not an all-inclusive, all-Australian experience that was representative of an egalitarian society. Rather, as a popular ritual it involved a process of social exclusion and a labyrinth of social rules. Through the study of afternoon tea within domestic life, the experience of the tearooms, and tea-drinking practices, three key themes emerge with respect to the topic: the complexities of gender, the tension of social status, and the pursuit of leisure.

Australia's tea culture became embedded in rural Australia, where it developed its own identity that was linked with masculinity. This was a result of the billy's association with the bushman, and the bush workers tea drinking practices where tea breaks defined worked hours. As tea filtered into domestic life, a discernable shift occurred. Afternoon tea became a

celebration of the female aesthetics that valued daintiness and gentility; and provided women with the opportunity to speak freely and strengthen mutual relationships. In this domestic life there was a tension between the absence and presence of men. Male involvement could sometimes be fleeting and peripheral; however, they were welcomed and important as tea-cup carriers and involved father figures. Despite the occasionally critical voice of men, they were happily included in the ritual, provided they adhered to the protocols and rituals of the social space established by the women. As tea drinking became more commercialised, the establishment of tearooms shifted conceptions of gender with respect to tea. Tearooms were important social spaces associated with domesticity and femininity, which provided women with opportunities for employment and to move freely and socialise. Some establishments designed specialised rooms for women's use only, recognising the strength of this clientele base. It was acceptable for women to enter into the business world as the directress of a tearoom; likewise, working as a tearoom girl was a socially accepted profession. While tearooms were places where women could feel comfortable, the presence of men as potential love interests had implications for the working environment. A man's interest might be welcomed if his intentions were marital happiness and he had both wealth and ardent devotion to offer. However, a tension existed as not all women were constantly seeking husbands, and sexual advances by male patrons could be unwelcome.

The custom of afternoon tea also reveals the tension of social status that existed in this period. Throughout this period there was an insistence that afternoon tea was democratic and available to all, and a celebration of the leisurely informality of socialising with friends and family. However, the labyrinth of social rules intended to create an atmosphere of relaxed informality ironically created more stress for the hostess, and inevitably prevented many families from achieving the ideal. While there was an emphasis on afternoon tea being

democratic and available for all to take part in, the emphasis on elegance and associated paraphernalia fostered social tensions. What emerged was a middle class social world that was marked by certain wealth related expectations, such as the tea set which was esteemed as an emblem of respectability. Such expense was beyond the reach of working class budgets. Afternoon tea was also shaped by middle class social ideas, particularly of the need to be civilised and sophisticated. Social status was maintained by the existence of social boundaries that emerged from the different associated protocols. The need to maintain propriety and refinement in behaviour, to wait for introductions, and have an awareness of social hierarchies all reflected the reality that afternoon tea required a particular social world based on social inclusions, exclusions and wealth.

Finally, a study of afternoon tea reveals a wealth of information pertaining to the pursuit of leisure. The experience of afternoon tea was dependent on the proviso that people had leisure time available to enjoy it, whether indoors or out on picnics. Leisure time in domestic life required a performance between balancing propriety and certain societal expectations with the realities of life. Although comprising a series of rituals and protocols, afternoon tea in the home provided women the opportunity to share life experiences and gossip, and to strengthen friendships. Within the public, urban space, both men and women visited tearooms because they provided an exciting place in the cities to socialise, and to engage with modernity and cosmopolitanism. There existed a strong tension of work versus leisure. Hosting an afternoon tea was an enjoyable experience for the guests, yet it involved a lot of hard work by the hostess, as demonstrated by 'Cornelia', and thus it could be an unwelcome experience. Hostesses exerted much energy into giving the appearance of prosperity at their afternoon tea gatherings, as though there was domestic service when in reality there seldom was. Likewise, the experience enjoyed by patrons in the tearoom was contingent on the work of

others. To ensure an aesthetically appealing tearoom that would attract clientele, the proprietors worked hard at providing such a service, while meeting the practical pressures of urban living and catering to the whims of the public.

The little ceremonies and rituals that emerged around the taking of afternoon tea provide an interesting and insightful glimpse into the tensions that surfaced as Australian society evolved from being a colony to become a nation. The practices around afternoon tea infiltrated many aspects of daily life and helped define the boundaries between domestic and commercial, rural and urban, work and leisure, and the duties and obligations that define gender. The multifaceted aspects and stature of afternoon tea as part of daily life reached its zenith in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fashions and tastes changed with time, and Devonshire tea and High tea have replaced this understanding of afternoon tea. Afternoon tea during this period divided as much as it united; it connected with broader themes that provide a fascinating window into Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. A poem appearing in the *Bulletin*, 1913, ridiculed Australia's tea drinking obsession: 'Tea, tea, afternoon-tea, poisonous cup that is frequent and free'.

Poisonous? Perhaps. Frequent? Of course. Free? Never.

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