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## Barmaids: A History of Women's Work in Pubs, by Diane Kirkby

### Abstract

This review of *Barmaids* by Diane Kirkby explores the development of women's work in Australian pubs over the history of European settlement in Australia. Written for Professor Birkner's Modern Australia course, this review also connects *Barmaids* to themes of the class.

### Keywords

Australian history, barmaids, women's history, bars, pubs

### Comments

Written for HIST 228: Modern Australia

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*The Bar* (1954), John Brack

*Barmaids: A History of Women's Work in Pubs*, by Diane Kirkby

Lindsay Richwine

Professor Michael Birkner

HIST 228: Modern Australia

Second Paper

April 27, 2021

I affirm that I have upheld the highest standards of honesty and integrity in my academic work  
and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Lindsay Richwine

In 2006, John Brack's famous 1954 painting *The Bar* sold at auction for 3.12 million dollars, at the time a record-breaking sum for an Australian work of art.<sup>1</sup> Composed in the same grays and browns that characterize Brack's most famous work, *Collins St., 5pm* (1955), *The Bar* is a compelling portrait of the formidable barmaid who serves the office workers of *Collins St.* With sharp cheekbones, dark under-eye circles, and the knowing half-smile of someone familiar with the rough edges of humanity, she fixes her attention on the viewer as a sea of identical-looking commuters swarms in the mirror behind her. As the only distinguishable individual in the painting, her face anchors the entire work, giving the viewer the sense that, despite the all-male patronage of the bar, it is this woman who is real, wise, and in control.

While *The Bar* is part of Brack's social commentary on the drudgery of the lives of mid-twentieth-century Australian office-workers, the painting and the woman it features also provide a jumping-off point for a discussion of the role of women in the male-dominated pub culture of Australia. The pub was and is a central feature of Australian male social life; seeing this painting though, one wonders about the women who stood behind bars, weighing in on conversations, keeping order, and creating a convivial atmosphere. It is these women that are the subject of Diane Kirkby's 1997 book *Barmaids: A History of Women's Work in Pubs*. In her research, Kirkby combines labor history and cultural history to paint a fascinating portrait of the role of women in Australian pub culture. By analyzing a variety of sources such as letters, leases, photographs, poems, and parliamentary records, Kirkby traces the history of pubs and their female employees and owners in Australia from the first European colonization to the late twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> "Record price for painting, bar none," *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 12, 2006, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/record-price-for-painting-bar-none-20060412-gdncn3.html>.

Kirkby's research connects to a variety of the themes that we have been studying in this class, including but not limited to the plight of convict women in the early days of Australia, the entrance of women into the workforce, the urbanization of Australia, the emergence of arts and culture in cities, the culture of rural towns and outposts, and the women's rights movement. In this essay, I follow Kirkby's model and organize her conclusions and findings and their connections to our class readings and discussions chronologically, beginning at the colonial era and ending in the twentieth century. There is a lot of great information in Kirkby's book, and because she covers nearly the entire timeframe we study in this class, there are almost endless connections to be made between her research and the topics that we have touched upon. Even though we are in the second half of our semester, I have included a good deal of information about women's work in pubs prior to World War I because I believe that there are relevant connections to be made with our previous coursework that continue to inform what we are seeing in our study of twentieth-century Australian history. In this review, I hope to make it as apparent as Kirkby has that women are and always have been active participants in Australian bar culture, and that by studying barmaids, we can learn a great deal about women's experiences in modern Australia.

In order to set the stage for her discussion of women's work in Australian bars, Kirkby begins with a brief history of European women and their connection to alcohol. In the Middle Ages, beer brewing was a domestic task, one most families undertook at home. Therefore, it was mostly women who were in charge of brewing and sometimes selling beer. Though women were eventually forced out of brewing by laws that separated the production and selling of beer, they still continued to brew at home, and many remained involved by running licensed beer houses, a profession that was considered suitable for widows and other women who had no other

recourse.<sup>2</sup> As time progressed, women were again forced out of beer selling by laws prohibiting them from victualling until very few alehouse keepers in England were women. However, this was not the case in Australia, where the colonial nature of the settlement kept some rules laxer for a time and allowed women to continue as pubkeepers.<sup>3</sup>

*Barmaids* asserts that women have worked in bars since almost the very beginnings of European colonization. At first, many helped their families informally in family-owned pubs and inns, to the more modern notion of becoming “working girls,” employed independently from family and supporting themselves.<sup>4</sup> However, even the earliest female settlers, the convicted British women sentenced to transportation to Australia, participated in the Australian barkeeping industry. In the Anne Summers article that we read for class, she asserts that one of the ways in which ex-convict women were disenfranchised as compared to their male counterparts was that they had very few options for earning their passage home. Many resorted to prostitution to attempt to support themselves, a practice that often ended up getting them sentenced again.<sup>5</sup> In Kirkby’s book, we learn that running an alehouse was one of the only ways besides prostitution that a woman could support herself after being released from her sentence. Kirkby writes that, in the early 1800s, about half of the women who ran licensed houses were ex-convict women. Though this is a relatively small proportion of the population of convict women, it is significant that even some were able to support themselves by running pubs and inns.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As we talked about in class in our discussion of *The Road from Coorain*, it was often acceptable for widows to continue occupations or hold property not normally available to women. Historically, many women have gained power and agency in this way.

<sup>3</sup> Diane Kirkby, *Barmaids: A History of Women’s Work in Pubs* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Summers, “Damned Whores,” in *Damned Whores and God’s Police* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1975, 2002), 320.

<sup>6</sup> Kirkby, *Barmaids*, 24.

In the later nineteenth century, pub work also provided opportunity for widows to earn some of their own money. For example, the infamous Ned Kelly's mother Ellen supported her family through the operation of a grog shop to that served goldminers.<sup>7</sup> The goldrush in which Ellen Kelly saw a business opportunity brought about the creation of more ale houses across the country as settlements sprung up around gold-rich locations. According to Kirkby, "pubs spearheaded the conquest of new areas" and were central to rural life.<sup>8</sup> For men, pubs were the primary social space outside of the home.<sup>9</sup> As they were often the best-equipped building in the settlement, pubs and inns sometimes served additional functions as community meeting places for religious worship, court hearings, business transactions, theatre, and other social functions.<sup>10</sup> As proprietors and employees of these venues, women were able to become important community members. As Australia grew more developed and cities like Melbourne and Sydney became more cosmopolitan, the role of women in pubs changed with the times.

As drinking venues looked to appear more refined in times that were creating cities like "Marvelous Melbourne," they often turned to barmaids to maintain this aesthetic. Bars in Australian theatres began to emulate the European elegance we see in the French artist Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882) and often sought out young, pretty, respectable women to contribute to the glamour of the space. Intending to provide an alternative to the prostitutes that tended to haunt theatres and hotels, bars in these locations looked for barmaids with a more wholesome sex appeal that was designed to satisfy the male gaze but attract a more refined clientele.<sup>11</sup> Despite exposure to what was surely a bothersome amount of romantic

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Alomes, Mark Dober, and Donna Hellier, "The Social Context of Postwar Conservatism," in *Australia's First Cold War, 1945–1953*, vol. 1, Society, Communism, and Culture, eds. Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (Sydney, London, Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Kirkby, *Barmaids*, 28–30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 46.

attention, bartending was a good way for more refined, more attractive lower to middle class women to earn a living, and many jumped at the chance.<sup>12</sup> Though bartending required long hours on one's feet and involved many tiring tasks, it offered better pay than servant work and a chance to meet and mingle with young men of perhaps a higher social status.<sup>13</sup> It was also a bit more glamorous than, say, scrubbing floors, but was still a job in which women could use the domestic skills they already had.<sup>14</sup> However, as women became more common behind Australian bars, there were forces at work that tried their utmost to hinder their progress.

Despite the “respectability” of most barmaids (most did not moonlight as prostitutes or burlesque dancers), the association made between barmaids and sex eventually became a point of contention and an issue in movements that attempted to outlaw women's work behind bars. Kirkby describes a series of parliamentary debates in various Australian states in the late nineteenth century over whether or not women should be allowed to continue as barmaids. Some opponents argued that by prohibiting women from bartending, they were protecting the virtue of the women. Others argued that it was the young men enticed by the pretty faces of these “modern manifestations of Eve in the garden of Eden” who needed protection.<sup>15</sup> Though bills to permanently bar women from the bar were shot down, the so-called “problem of the barmaids” became tied into the push for temperance that developed in this era.<sup>16</sup> Kirkby's discussion of the relationship between the temperance movement and female bartending is pertinent not only to my own research interests but also to our discussion on the involvement of white women in “benevolent” activities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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<sup>12</sup> An informal survey of a few female friends who have worked as bartenders confirms that these nineteenth-century barmaids probably had to do their fair share of rejecting advances and brushing off creepy comments.

<sup>13</sup> Kirkby, *Barmaids*, 48–51, 53.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–85.



The mid-nineteenth century in England, America, and Australia saw a surge in women's activism. Women, often motivated by religious or moral beliefs, supported and became leaders for a variety of causes including temperance, anti-prostitution, mental health reform, women's suffrage, and—in America—anti-slavery. Social mores of the time—what American historian Barbara Welter called the Cult of True Womanhood—dictated that women be dedicated only to their home, family, piety, and purity. Women were also seen as nurturing guardians of morality. In Australia, these virtuous women were called “God's Police” by a reformer named Caroline Chisholm who promoted the ideal. Chisholm was a British immigrant who made her name as a reformer in the first half of the nineteenth century by her efforts to secure assistance for single women in the country. However, though Chisholm's attitudes were benevolent as she helped young women find “decent” employment and offered assistance in their immigration to Australia, she was still quite traditional in her views, opposing, for example, equal pay for women, a practice which she believed would deter them from their ultimate duty in life—which was, of course, marriage.<sup>17</sup> Though this pressure to be guardians of morality was restrictive, it also gave women moral authority which they then used to involve themselves in activism outside of the home. However, though this morally justified civic involvement gave many women a stronger public voice, it was not always used for purposes that we would consider enlightened or progressive today.

One can draw some parallels between the concept of maternal colonialism proposed by Margaret D. Jacobs that we discussed in class and the anti-barmaid movement advocated by women involved in the temperance movement. While both the temperance movement and the

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<sup>17</sup>Pat Gallasch, “‘Damned Whores & God's Police,’” *Off Our Backs* 13, no. 3 (1983): 4, accessed April 28, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25774900>. For more on the concept of God's Police, see the entirety of Anne Summer's *Damned Whores and God's Police*, a chapter of which we read for class.

efforts of women to “rescue” aboriginal children gave the women involved in these movements more power and a voice in the public sphere, their newfound influence came at the price of the well-being and livelihoods of barmaids and aboriginal peoples, respectively. Moreover, both temperance advocates and maternal colonialists used the popular images of women as guards of morality and family values to justify their involvement in public life. While maternal colonialists claimed that as mothers, they were best fitted for the work of “rescuing” aboriginal children, women involved in the temperance movement justified their crusade against barmaids, who they cast as temptresses, as a fight for family values threatened by the evils of alcohol.<sup>18</sup> As the nineteenth century progressed, however, groups like the Victorian Women’s Christian Temperance Union (founded 1887) that opposed female bartending were more feminist in their aims and were ultimately more concerned with the long hours and unfairly compensated labor that barmaids performed.<sup>19</sup> By the time of the first World War, the “problem of the barmaids” had become much more related to unionizing and to the feminist movement that would take form in the mid-twentieth century.

As women’s rights began to advance in the early twentieth century, the nature of female bartending and the discourse surrounding barmaids began to change. By 1910, women had gained the right vote in all Australian states, paving the way for their increased participation in the public sphere.<sup>20</sup> With these new freedoms, anxieties about barmaids as women in the public sphere began to abate as working women became more normalized.<sup>21</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret D. Jacobs, “Maternal Colonialism: White Women and Indigenous Child Removal in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 4 (Winter, 2005): 456; Kirkby, *Barmaids*, 98–99, 109.

<sup>19</sup> Kirkby, *Barmaids*, 110–111.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Magarey, “1970—When It Changed: The Beginnings of Women’s Liberation in Australia,” in *Turning Points in Australian History*, ed. by Martin Crotty and David Andrew Roberts, 184–197 (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009), 186.

<sup>21</sup> Kirkby, *Barmaids*, 115.

however, the pub was becoming more and more defined as a man's domain, and women still left in bar work had to reassert their rights in bars.<sup>22</sup> While the formation of unions in the 1910s and Western Australia's implementation of equal wages in 1911 did some to help the cause of barmaids in the first decade of the twentieth century, it would take much longer and what Kirkby calls "the exceptional circumstances of world war" for barmaids to have leverage with which to advocate for themselves.<sup>23</sup>

In the 1920s, the advent of the "new woman," or the "flapper," inspired an image of a capable no-nonsense barmaid.<sup>24</sup> However, this cultural revolution coincided with new regulations that made work more difficult for barmaids. In the 1910s and 1920s, even as states were enacting legislation to curb drinking by closing bars early at 6:00PM, beer consumption in Australia increased by thirty-one percent.<sup>25</sup> This new closing time—which in many places was implemented through the 1960s—created a rush between 5:00PM and 6:00PM that taxed barmaids.<sup>26</sup> It is this "six o'clock swill" that Brack depicts in *The Bar*. Despite the sometimes-grueling shifts, women remained at work in bars through this era. Though many women were pushed out of bar work during the 1930s as they were perceived as threats to male employment, the outbreak of World War II re-opened positions for women in bars as the absence of men created jobs on the Homefront into which women eagerly stepped.<sup>27</sup> At the war's end, many of these women kept their positions because of a continued shortage of male labor and their ability to argue effectively that their work was equal to that of male bartenders. These women emphasized the necessity of charm, cleanliness, hospitality, and honesty in bar work, values

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 141, 146.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 159–160.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 146, 148.

which in the 1940s and 1950s were strongly associated with women.<sup>28</sup> These arguments kept women involved as barmaids through the 1950s and 1960s, where moral conservatism continued to be stressed under Liberal Party leaders like Tom Playford of South Australia and Harry Bolte of Victoria, both of whom implemented six o'clock closing of hotel bars in their efforts.<sup>29</sup> However, in the 1970s, changing cultural values, economics, and attitudes towards drinking changed female bar work for good.

By the 1970s, calls for equal pay were supported by the women's liberation movement that we read about in Susan Magarey's article. Women began marching and agitating for rights, asserting that they had long been bartending just as well or better than the men they worked alongside.<sup>30</sup> While they won a victory in the 1968 Hotel Award, which gave hotel workers a five-day, forty-hour week and guaranteed women equal pay with men, bars remained very gendered spaces, even as more women began drinking in more glamorous clubs and lounges that sprung up during the economic prosperity of the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>31</sup> As we saw briefly in the 2002 movie *Black and White*, some bars—even those tended by barmaids—refused to serve women through the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>32</sup> As part of the women's liberation movement, many women began to protest these restrictions. Magarey mentions that in 1965, activists Merle Thornton and Ro Bogner, both young, middle-class mothers, chained themselves to bar at Regetta Hotel to protest laws that prohibited women from being served at front bars.<sup>33</sup> As the general population of Australian women were advocating for their rights on the other side of the bar, barmaids continued to advocate for equal treatment. In the spirit of the times that Magarey describes in her

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 156–157.

<sup>29</sup> Stuart MacIntyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, fourth edition (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 212–213.

<sup>30</sup> Kirkby, *Barmaids*, 190–191.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>32</sup> *Black and White*, directed by Craig Lahiff, (Sony Pictures Classic, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Magarey, “1970—When It Changed,” 186.

article, barmaids requested equal terminology—requesting the phrase “bar attendant” rather than the gender-specific barmaid and barman—an important step in advocating for equality of the sexes.<sup>34</sup> By the 1980s, the conversation had shifted from the simple request for equality to the sexual harassment that female bar attendants have experienced throughout Australian history.<sup>35</sup> The sexualization of barmaids had remained alive and well since the nineteenth century, and women in the 1980s and 1990s finally felt that they had enough legal presence to agitate for change.

Today, female bartenders and hotel owners can be found all over Australia and the world. While some of the issues that the first Australian barmaids contended with—sexual harassment and objectification, unruly customers, and a persistent wage gap—have not yet completely disappeared, the situation for Australian women in general and barmaids specifically has improved thanks to the efforts of their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. Through her research, Kirkby has given us a fascinating account of women’s experience in the traditionally male space of pubs. Moreover, *Barmaids* provides a lens through which we can learn a great deal about gender, labor, and cultural history in Australia. I both enjoyed and was enlightened by this book and would highly recommend it to anyone interested in women’s history, labor history, or beer!

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<sup>34</sup> Kirkby., *Barmaids*, 191.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

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