

Common Pleasures: Low Culture in Sydney 1887-1914

Susan Doyle

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledge. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Susan Doyle', with a stylized, cursive script.

Susan Doyle.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In *Heterologies* De Certeau writes:

By a professional reflex, the historian refers any discourse to the socioeconomic or mental conditions that produced it. He needs to apply this kind of analysis to his own discourse in a manner that will make it pertinent to the elucidation of those forces that presently organise representations of the past.

Accordingly, in the interests of breaking open my own discourse, I will outline some of the circumstances which led me to undertake this thesis and the bodies of knowledge and personal baggage which have informed its writing.

My original undergraduate training, undertaken in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was in cultural anthropology, English literature, and European history. The first sparked an enduring interest in micro-practices and beliefs. The last two, in combination with a lifetime's reading of Victorian novels, inspired an interest in the nineteenth century. A gap of some thirty odd years ensued before I returned to non-vocational tertiary study and undertook, as what used to be called an 'irregular student', a course in Australian Cultural History taught by Penny Russell at Sydney University. The course introduced me to the ethnographic approach to history through the work of writers like Greg Dening, Robert Darnton and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Darnton has said that the ethnographic historian 'studies the way ordinary people made sense of the world', encapsulating an approach which appealed to my anthropological training. The course also revealed to me the joys of research which led to an MA thesis on representations of Sydney in fiction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the course of researching for that thesis I became curious about the people, the things, the activities that seemed to have been left out of most of the documentary sources. In particular I found it perplexing that the lower class, the poor, the humble, however one chooses to term them, though numerically dominant, had only a precarious foothold in history. The details of the lived experience of this obscure majority seemed to me mysterious and exotic, more interesting and more meaningful than grand historical rubrics of nation and identity which left great swathes of life unexamined and unexplained. I came to consider it an important social task to acknowledge these people, akin perhaps to Michelet's pronouncement that it is the work of the living in writing history to quiet the dead.

When I began this PhD I planned to take an ethnographic approach to the topic, gleaning as much detail on practices and rituals as possible and searching for their meanings, their internal logic. However insights gained in a series of overcrowded but lively postgrad seminars on modernity taught by Zdenko Zlatar enabled me to see that the period I was concerned with was in fact one of radical change, not only sweeping change in technology and the arts, but also less spectacular changes in socio-cultural formations which were ultimately to transform everyday life.

Another factor which influenced the writing was awareness of a new body of theoretical work which was having a profound effect on the social sciences and the humanities. The conversations of academic friends and family members had alerted me to the work of that disparate group of theorists classed as 'post-modern' or 'post-structuralist' among other terms and to the transformations that their work was effecting in the academic world. As I began selectively to read these writers it became apparent that a whole world of theory had developed since I was an undergraduate. Some conservative historians like Keith Windschuttle were dismissive, questioning the relevance and

appropriateness of these ideas to the writing of history. This ought primarily, so they held, to be concerned with sources not theories. I found however that the work of particular writers was illuminating when applied to the texted past and could be used to unlock deeper levels of meaning.

I have been aware throughout the writing process that the culture I was describing represents a thin archaeological veneer laid over a much deeper layer of pre-existing culture, namely that of Australia's indigenous inhabitants. Although I am aware that any attempt to acknowledge its ancient and powerful presence can be no more than the merest tokenism, nonetheless I feel that it is necessary to make a gesture in this regard. This, I felt, was preferable to inattention in the face of the moral enormities which the dispossession of its owners have entailed. To pass over it in silence would seem complicit with historical attempts to nullify both the culture and the prior claims of the people who practised it. Such inattention inevitably deepens the injury to the national psyche which so urgently needs attention.

Although the writing of this thesis has been essentially a solitary task, it would be a considerably poorer product had it not been for the contributions of a number of people, to whom I would like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude: to Peter Doyle for his wide-ranging knowledge, rigorous intellectual standards and keen eye for shapely narrative and the generosity with which he placed them at my disposal; to Bidy Doyle for her lively and unique way of engaging with the written word which has been both inspiring and corrective; to Malcolm Skewis and Bruce Doar for their perceptive reading and comments on early drafts of part one; to Sharon Davidson for intense and sometimes difficult discussions which helped me to clarify a number of historiographical problems; to John Whiteoak whose unstinting kindness in reading drafts and enormous knowledge of Australian popular music allowed me to correct some omissions, misconceptions and

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Abstract

This thesis describes and analyses lower-class culture in inner-urban Sydney from 1887 to 1914 as it was enacted in three key institutions—the pub, the vaudeville theatre and the street. It proposes that resistance from below to the dominant order was commonly articulated through cultural codes and practices. Moreover these were historically specific, determined by contemporaneous facts and conditions.

The historic period under discussion spans the transition from Victorian to modern culture. It saw the spectacular growth of the cities and confirmed Australia as an urban nation. It also saw the development of a self-conscious national culture shaped by a rural ethos. Despite the prominence of rural motifs in the ideology of nationalism it was in the cities that the forging of a truly national, though unvalorised popular culture was taking place. I am interested in the intersections of popular discourses and practices with those of the city and of modernity and in how they shaped the complex evolution of an urban lower-class culture.

My approach in this thesis is interpretive and often impressionistic, though based on extensive use of sources. The term 'lower class' has been used in preference to 'working class' to reflect a focus on how the abstraction known as class was substantiated through cultural artefacts and practices rather than through relations to political or economic facts and conditions. Emphasis is on close scrutiny of the particular rather than the construction of a grand narrative, on everyday practices rather than the ideological framework which contains them. This represents a move away from, in Fiske's words 'the totalising structures and mechanisms of power to the heterogeneous practices of everyday life'.