metro education

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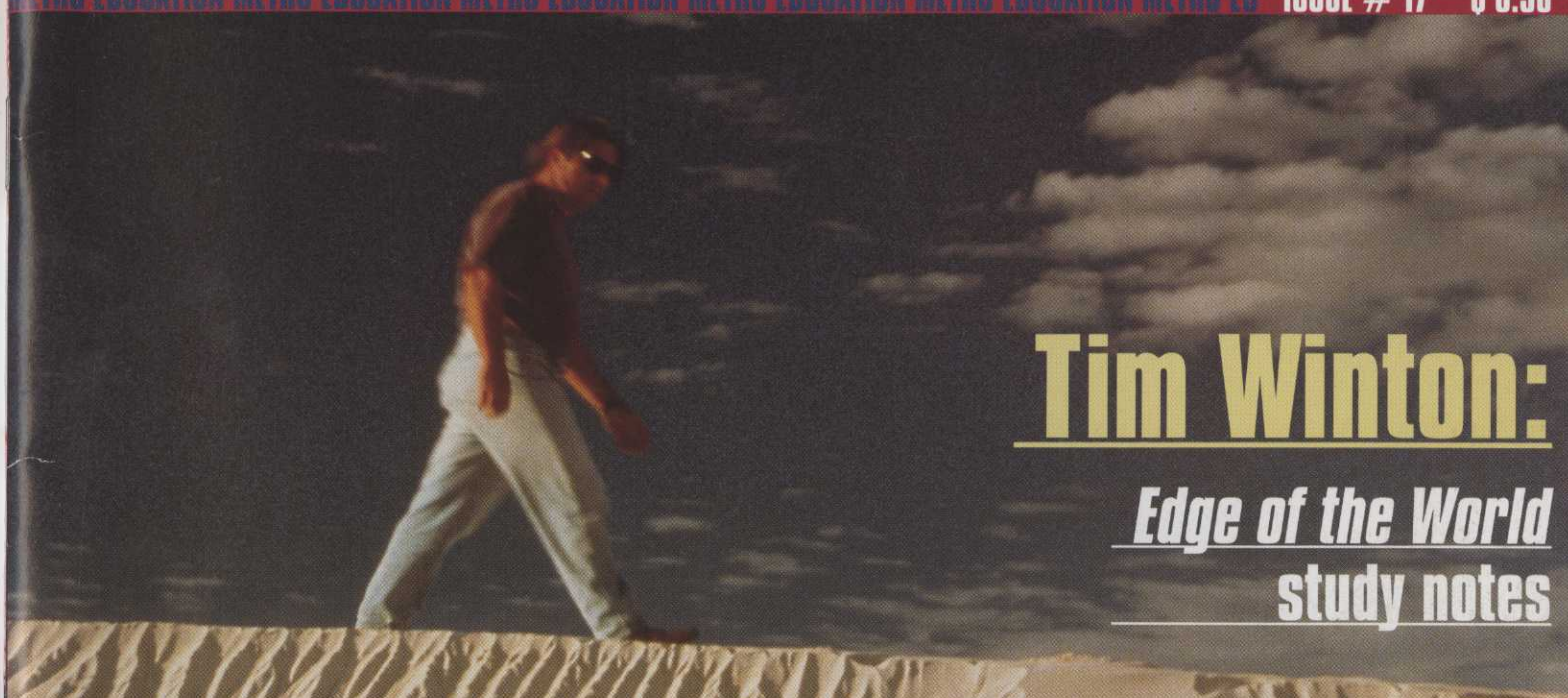

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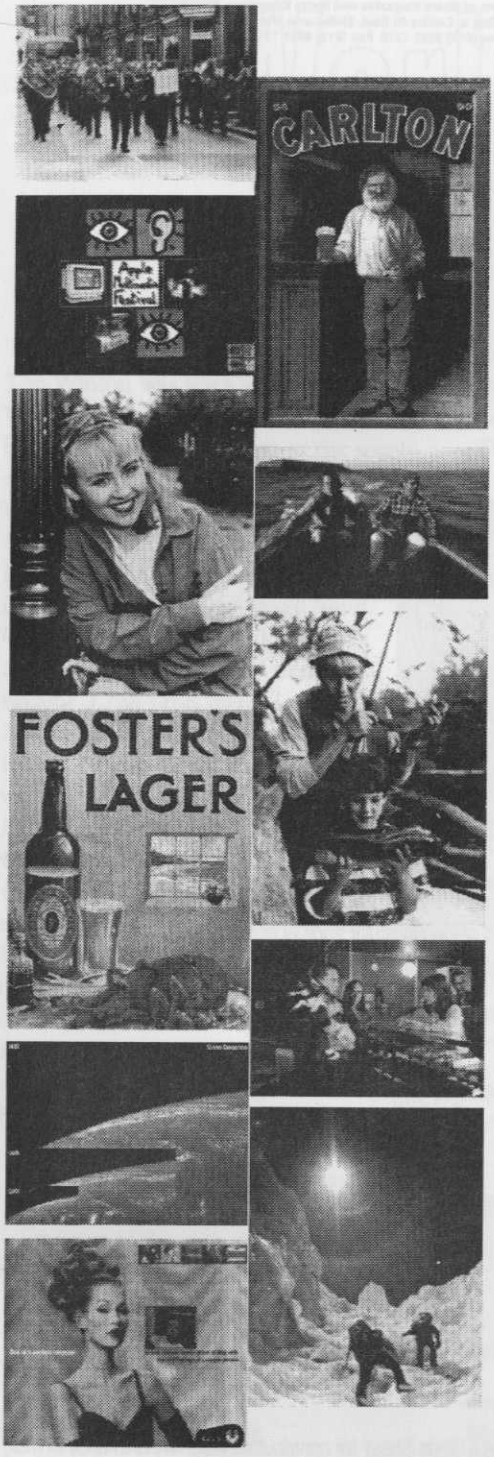

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METRO EDUCATION

Metro Education has been established as an essential part of ATOM's program of support for classroom teachers of English, Film as Text and Media. Its aim is to provide a forum for the ongoing exchange of ideas and useful classroom material for teachers across Australia.

The current need for *Metro Education* is absolutely crucial because of the recent National Statements and Profiles. These have been accepted as the basis for curriculum planning across Australia. Teachers in all states and territories now face the challenges of developing classroom materials and addressing the issues of student learning outcomes.

Given the national curriculum context, there is enormous value in the development of a publication which encourages a national approach to the sharing of ideas and teaching materials. Such a publication will add depth to our understanding of national curriculum issues and of the particular approaches taken in different states. The current national context offers the possibility for exploration and innovation in the delivery of the media curriculum.

The need for this publication clearly exists! Its success will depend entirely on the good will of teachers, their willingness to share their ideas and their commitment to provide units of work, classroom lessons, teaching strategies and approaches and samples of student work.

The Editorial Committee of *Metro Education* is excited about the prospects and possibilities for this publication. Ultimately *Metro Education* can only be a reflection of the support that it receives from you. We look forward to your support and we welcome your ideas and suggestions for its development.

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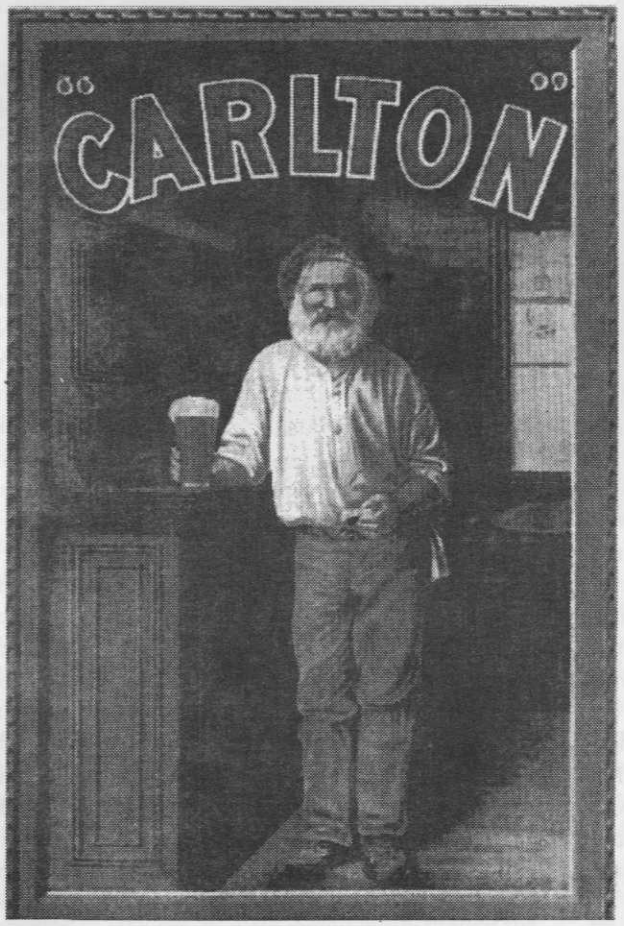
I Feel Like a Blokey ID or Two

Beer Ads, Masculinity and Australian Identity

Mark Roxburgh

This paper will examine a number of beer commercials for Victoria Bitter (VB), Tooheys and Sydney Bitter, and argue that their representations of masculinity have historical antecedents in discourses of Australian national identity that are almost exclusively patriarchal and Anglo. It will also examine the way in which the notion of the masculine gaze frames both the discourses of hetero-masculinity and national identity, and the way in which other subject positions are effectively excluded from participation in the making of the nation by these discourses.



Stuart Hall contends that identity is 'constituted not outside but within representation' (Hall, 1990: 236). Representation is defined as 'an image, likeness or reproduction' (Onions, 1973: 1800) thus the manifestation of a masculine Australian national identity in the beer commercials under review, whilst relying on metaphor, is literally the production of a scopic regime. This scopic regime not only works from the outside looking in (the audience viewing the ads) but there is also the internal gaze of the subjects within the ads that helps to place patriarchy at the centre of nationalist discourse. I will return to this theme of the gaze later. For now I would like to touch upon the historical antecedents of these beer commercials as sites for a gendered and masculine Australian national identity discourse.

The dominant image of Australian national identity that has permeated many forms of representation is of the hard-working, hard-living, tough, self-reliant, Anglo-bushman (Castles et al, 1992: 7-9; Stephens qtd in Lee, 1994: 5; Ward, 1978: 1-2). This characterisation was most typical in the 19th century when Australia's main means of economic wealth was based on rural production. With the rise of industrialisation in the latter part of that century and the outbreak of World War I, the 'typical Australian' was transformed into the digger and during the cold war period he became the anti-authoritarian, self-employed, urban battler. Typically he is a man who tackles the challenge of taming wild landscapes and subjugating them to his authority and transforming them into a kind of Eden (Barrett 1992: 84-85). In this historical perspective Australia, the land, was always feminine but Australian identity was always masculine. Pringle described Australia and Australians in gender terms in the 1950s when he said that the Australian character was 'immediately recognisable in her soldiers as in her poets, in her politicians as in her cricketers' (Pringle qtd in Barrett, 1992: 86). So the land is the mother that gives birth to her masculine offspring, the nation.

In his study of the images of men in advertising, Andrew Wernick explores the way in which men are largely represented as operating in the public sphere, engaging in the discourses of science, technology, economy and progress, whilst women are largely represented within the private and domestic sphere as beneficiaries of men's public activities (Wernick, 1987: 283). Gender is inscribed into the public/private spheres along masculine/feminine lines, and where man is pitted against nature 'for the most part feminised Nature knew her place: to provide the raw materials or the picturesque backdrop for the

world of private plenty that Promethean Man was proudly ushering in' (Wernick, 1987: 286). Gender differentiation between man and nature is a feature of the ads. Both the Tooheys and VB ads concentrate on images of men working to control nature, or each other, whilst the Sydney Bitter ads show us feminine nature conquered by man and used as a playground.

The VB ad consists of a series of shots placing Anglo men in outdoor and public settings where all other significant figures are also Anglo men, the one exception being a shot where a group of farmers sit on the verandah of a homestead drinking beer with a single woman amongst them. It consists of a series of narrated vignettes each telling a story of how you can get 'it', a thirst for beer, and how that thirst can best be quenched by VB. It is a thirst gained through hard, physical work as seen in the series of different settings: a shot of a man feeding cattle which cuts to a group of men playing Aussie Rules which cuts to male farmers burning off sugar cane, then sitting on a verandah drinking beer. To reinforce the theme of work to the climax of consumption, the editing device is repeated. We see a shot of a man carving a lamb on a spit, which cuts to a shot where one man shows two others how to catch mudcrabs, which cuts to a shot of them sitting on a beach drinking beer.

At the moment when beer is consumed the theme is of satisfying a thirst after having tamed feminine nature and producing from this engagement some kind of material and emotional benefit. It is at this symbolically post-coital juncture that masculinity is inscribed as dominant and the benefits derived are a kind of re/production of the hegemonic masculine self. It is noteworthy that the engagement with nature is adversarial and the symbolic coital union could indeed be read as a kind of metaphoric rape.

It is also important to note that the masculine/feminine metaphors position heterosexuality as the dominant sexuality as it guarantees continued re/production. In nationalist discourse the concept of heterosexual sex as being normative and other forms of sex being deviant is a central concern, for it ensures not only the biological but the cultural re/production of the nation (Alexander, 1994: 10; Yuval-Davis, 1993: 622; Heng and Devan, 1992: 344). These themes of the gendering of nation and nature, the implication of forced coitus and the normalising of heterosexuality are fundamental to colonial nationalist discourse for 'racial or cultural dominance derives much of its energy from sexual dominance' (Shetty, 1994: 76). The cultural homogeneity of people within the beer ads and their overt heterosexual masculinity also taps into the colonial history of Australia, a history based on racist, and sexist discourses (Castles et al, 1992: 18-19; Clark, 1981: 4-5, 16; Grimshaw et al, 1994: 177-180).

Many of these themes are also played out in the Tooheys draught ad where the setting is again rural. The narrative revolves around a muscular, Anglo jackeroo attempting to break a wild horse in the stockyards of an outback property. He tries and fails several times, has doubts about his ability to break the horse and finally succeeds. His efforts are watched by a group of Anglo-looking male jackeroos and a single Anglo (blonde) female jillaroo.

In this ad we see again a man dominating and taming feminine nature, for although the horse is described as he, it becomes transformed into a feminine sign by its weakness in being defeated by the masculine jackeroo. As noted in Wernick's study, this binary gender construct between man and nature has been a dominant feature of representation in advertising, and in nationalist discourse the oppositional other is characterised by the use of feminine pejorative terms. Shetty (1994) also discusses the feminisation of weak men in her critique of *The Wine of Astonishment*, an anti-colonial novel set in Trinidad in the early 20th century which deals with the remaking of the nation. She describes how the novel constructs the anti-colonial nationalist characters as being warrior-like and manly whilst the colonial forces and their conspirators are 'foppish, effeminate, 'lean fellars' with clean finger-nails and pointy tipped shoes' (Shetty, 1994: 74).

It is a theme that has also featured in Australian nationalist discourse and indeed Henry Lawson, considered a chronicler of Australian identity, was criticised by A.G. Stephens for his later more pessimistic work in terms of a masculine/feminine binary critique (Stephens in Lee, 1994: 5). For Stephens, Lawson's best work was objective, rational and positive, the product of a strong (masculine) mind whilst his later work was subjective, irrational and negative, the product of a weak (feminine) heart (Lee, 1994: 6-7). In analysing Stephens' critique of Lawson's work, Lee formulates a series of binary relationships that Stephens employed in his criticisms.

Stephens constructs a narrative which effectively separates the signs 'Lawson' and 'Australia'. Clearly Australia = youth + optimism + health + Bush + male; while England = age + pessimism + morbidity + city + female (Lee, 1994: 11).

Evident here is the way in which the city is constructed as effeminate. When reading the Tooheys ad, this construct has important ramifications for the assertion of masculine heterosexuality and by implication a masculine heterosexual nationalism. The jackeroo breaking the horse is a 'city slicker', as stated in the narration, and there is obvious doubt in the mind of the narrator, which is also the mind of all of the other jackeroos and the authentic voice of Australian hetero-masculinity, whether the 'city slicker' is tough enough to do it. Here the city equals weak and effeminate, the jackeroo must overpower the horse, must overcome feminine nature, or he will forever be relegated to the status of the effeminate city boy and his heterosexuality will be in question. By proving himself a heterosexual man by overcoming effeminate nature he becomes authenticated as an icon of Australian identity.

Reading these ads not only representations of hetero-masculinity but also of Australian identity, we can think of the scopic regime that actively constructs these identities as also being masculine. The narrative focus of both ads centres on men's actions against nature or each other. All actions are viewed predominantly by other men within the narratives, and thus the act of authentication of what constitutes manly behaviour occurs through their witness.

At one point in the Tooheys ad the city slicker is sitting in a barn, *alone* and racked with self-doubt, and in having a flashback of being thrown we see his defeat and his journey to effeminacy through his mind's eye. When he finally breaks the horse, it occurs in the present and is witnessed by all the other jackeroos. And at the end of the ad when he has a flashback of breaking the horse, he is surrounded by all of the jackeroos. Both these latter shots place

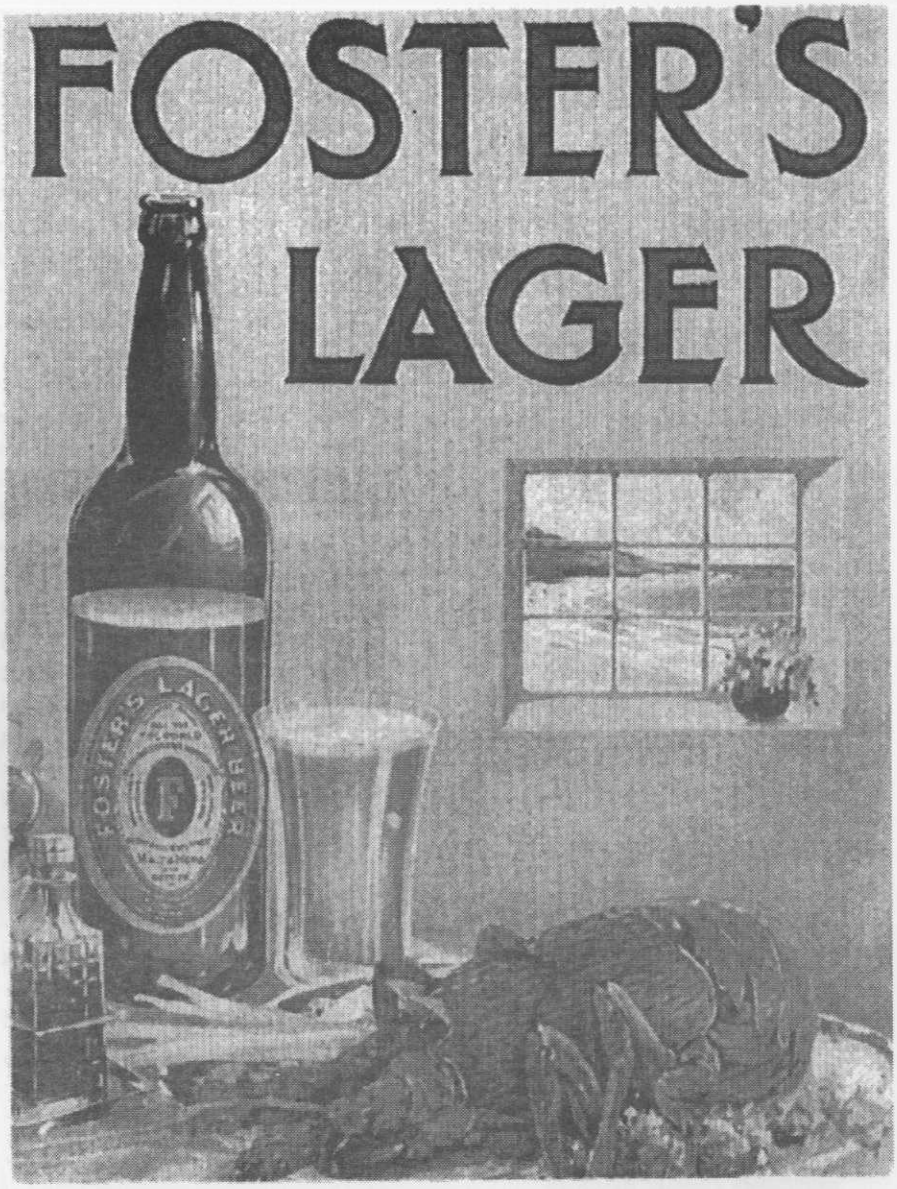
the mind's eye within the group of men collectively, and by witnessing his success he is returned from the brink of unmanliness.

Though most of the characters in the Tooheys and VB ads are Anglo men, a lone woman appears in each and is not seen engaging in any activity other than looking at the men. Whilst the dominant gaze in rendering all men as hetero-masculine is that of their masculine peers, the admiring gaze of the women ensures that we are in no doubt about it. Their very presence and their gaze towards the men signifies heterosexuality and the potential of reproduction.

Their presence is passive, however, they partake in no work that we can see, they either watch men work (as in the Tooheys ad) or watch them afterwards (as in the VB ad). It is the men who are active and this contrast in activity reminds us, and the men themselves, that they are indeed hetero-masculine. Both women are the beneficiaries of men's activities, they participate in the consumption of the beer and social intercourse that has been earned not by themselves but through the men's hard work. This relegates them to secondary players in the narratives and positions the men as the stereotypical breadwinner/protector/provider of the species, reinforcing patriarchy as the dominant social force.

An interesting variation, stylistically and in terms of the type of Australian identity that is constituted within them, are the two Sydney Bitter ads reviewed. These are set within Sydney so that the hetero-masculine rural identity of the former two ads is displaced by an urban masculinity. Given that the Stephens formula mentioned earlier placed the city, and by virtue of association its inhabitants, on the effeminate side of the binary equation, and given that the enduring image of Australian identity is of the rural hetero-male, there is an apparent problem for the masculine characters of these ads, that is, there must be a question mark over their sexuality.

In the Tooheys and VB ads the male characters were working outdoors against nature and this struggle was the enactment of hetero-masculine dominance over the feminised landscape. The women in each ad reconfirmed the men's status as hetero-masculine through their presence, through their gaze and through their signification



as potential partners for reproduction. They were the passive beneficiaries of men's actions but interestingly were not overtly gazed upon by any of the men which leads me to conclude that the men in these ads were confident of their heterosexuality.

In the Sydney Bitter ads work does not figure largely in the visuals, though it is referred to in the narrative, in contrast to the previous ads. Significantly though the one narrator that is seen at work is a landscaper, thus a continuum of hetero-masculine physical dominance over feminised nature is established. Different too is the amount of screen time given to images of women in these ads compared to the Tooheys and VB ads. Most women in the Sydney Bitter ads are apparent strangers to the men and their main role is to be the object of the gaze of the narrators and by extension the viewer. As if in answer to the question mark over their hetero-masculinity, posed by their counterparts in the other ads, the narrators of these commercials appear to go out of their way to portray themselves as rampantly heterosexual by perving on just about every bit of 'skirt' passing them by. This overt display demonstrates a metaphoric sexual insecurity and seems to me to be a reaction to and an awareness of the dominant historical image of Australian identity being the rural heterosexual male.

The first Sydney Bitter ad reviewed revolves around a male narrator in inner-city Sydney. He is telling the viewer what a great place Sydney is, what a great nightlife it has, that it is 'fast and loud'. The narration occurs over a rapid succession of shots of different parts of the city, predominantly at night, with quite a number of shots of women. The soundtrack is an upbeat soul number and the camera move-

ments are jerky, the result of hand-held cinematography. The narrator appears to be in his early thirties and a bit of a yuppie.

The second Sydney Bitter ad is located in the cityside beach suburbs and its narrator appears to be in his mid-forties and a surfer. The narration occurs over a rapid succession of shots of a variety of activities associated with the beach and its environs. Again shots of women are plentiful and the same style of camera technique is used as is the soundtrack.

In the first Sydney Bitter ad the narrator talks of Sydney being 'fast' and that there is 'always something new' happening while we see shots of 'attractive' young women; later he exclaims: 'I just wanna taste it all ... yeah', which is juxtaposed first with a bottle of beer then more importantly with a shot of a blonde woman whom the camera looks over as if replicating the narrator's gaze. Through this juxtaposition both beer and women are established as equals in the eyes of the men, and the viewer, as being objects for men's consumption.

In the second Sydney Bitter ad the narrator says of Sydney 'I reckon it's the ultimate playground' while the ad cuts to a well-endowed, wet, blonde young woman in a bikini. When he says Sydney is the 'city of top beer gardens' we see a shot of one of his mates ogling two young women walking nearby. The closing sequence consists of the narrator and a group of mates drinking beer and checking out two more women as he says, supposedly, of the beer 'it's best kept for the locals' then finishes with a shot of the men laughing as they watch the women walking away into the distance.

In these ads, it appears that nature has been tamed and the new Eden has been ushered in. This theme is overtly acknowledged through the portrayal of the city as some kind of (sexual) playground where women and beer are in abundance for men's consumption. But it is a playground that one can only access through work. In the first Sydney Bitter ad when the narrator says 'the lifestyle? ... ya just gotta go for it' a number of the shots are of people at work. In the second one we see the narrator, briefly, at work outdoors and later he says 'a big day out calls for a big night out'.

So whilst on the surface the urban masculinity portrayed in the Sydney bitter ads might not seem to fit into our historical preconceptions of a masculine national Australian identity based on the rural stereotype, it has much in common with both the VB and Tooheys ads. The underlying theme of the Tooheys and VB ads is of a hard-earned thirst, the theme of the Sydney Bitter ads is 'work hard, play hard', with images of play emphasised.

The transformation from the bush male to a more urbanised masculinity, that we can see at play in these ads, has been prefigured in historical understandings of Australian identity. Frederick Eggleston noted of the typical (read hetero-masculine) Australian that 'the pioneering spirit is still very much alive, but it is not evoked by the lure of the open spaces but by the nature of the job to be done' (Eggleston qtd in Barrett, 1992: 84). The defining feature of nationalism here is the job not the location, so the integral link to the land has been broken. Thus, providing one works hard, one can be authenticated as a typical Australian male. Richard White described Australians as those who exhibited signs of 'independence, manliness, a fondness for sport, egalitarianism, a dislike of mental effort, self-confidence, and a certain disrespect for authority' (White, 1981: 76-77). Many or all of these features are demonstrated in the Sydney Bitter commercials.

These ads are different from the Tooheys and VB ads studied in that they locate Australian identity within an urban context, as if to highlight the myth that we are largely a rural culture, but they are similar in that they continue to locate hetero-masculinity at the centre of its production. They do not appear to have come much further in portraying Australian identity than the VB and Tooheys ads. The scenery has changed but the actors and story are essentially the same.

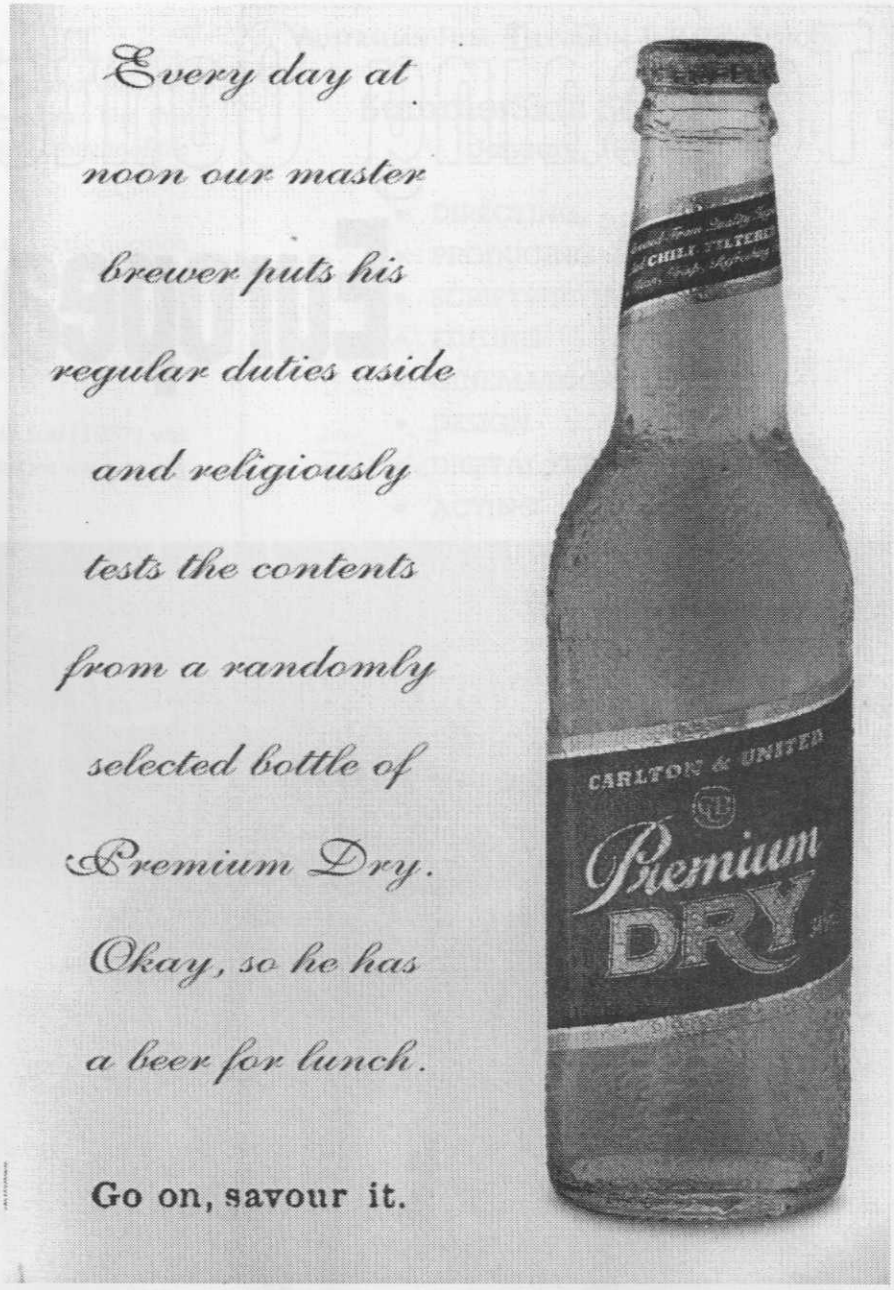
Well, 'big deal' you might say. What does it matter since beer ads are generally targeted at men anyway, merely a marketing ploy to sell more beer to its dominant consumers, men. But such a response denies that identity is constituted through representation and that by tapping into historical, patriarchal, Anglo and exclusionary discourses these ads in effect help to perpetrate their dominance and promote their currency as valid markers of what it means to be Australian. This does not deny that many Australians would identify with these types of images – we just need to look at Pauline Hanson's rhetoric and support to understand this – but it does deny the kinds of social and cultural shifts that have occurred in this country, particularly in the post-World War II period.

In his essay on narrative and national character Barrett acknowledges the power of textual representation for when viewing historical texts he claims that 'it is not at all possible to discover what Australians of the time were "like", but it is perhaps possible to glimpse an image of what the dominant discourses dictated that they should be like' (Barrett, 1992: 79). In light of this then it is easy to see that these ads form part of a historically dominant discourse about Australian identity, that is white, preferably Anglo, and most definitely male.

'Since nationalism and nations have usually been discussed as part of the public political sphere, the exclusion of women from that arena has effected their exclusion from that discourse as well' (Yuval-Davis, 1993: 622) and within the Australian context we might also add the many migrant/cultural groups that constitute this nation, for within nationalist ideologies 'processes of exclusion and inclusion are in operation wherever a delineation of boundaries takes place – as is the case with every ethnic and national collectivity - and many, if not most, include some elements of racist exclusions in their symbolic orders' (Yuval-Davis, 1993: 624). If we are to read the media in general and television commercials in particular as one of the many sites where our symbolic orders are constituted and transmitted then the ads under discussion here clearly delineate a nationalistic boundary.

All though read in isolation, as this essay does, these ads make pretty grim viewing in terms of providing us with a sense of the diverse kinds of Australian identities that we may begin to conceive of given the diversity of the population. Read within the context of the broad spectrum of television advertising the view is not quite so grim. There are many ads for example that challenge the dominance of the discourses presented in these beer ads. However they are not nearly as numerous as ads that perpetrate the myth that we are still exclusively a white Anglo culture.

As a kind of post-script it would be interesting to see a breakdown of the consumers of these beers, on the lines of gender and cultural background, as I suspect that there are many non-Anglos that purchase them; VB seems to be the beer of choice amongst the large Indo-Chinese community of Marrickville judging by my anecdotal observations. Such a survey may indicate that the images in these ads are really well and truly past their use by date.



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