

When Temperance met Commerce: Coffee Palaces of late 19th Century Australia

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The Echuca Coffee Palace, situated at the south end of High Street, on the west side, is a new addition to the architectural features of the town. It consists of a two storied, commodious brick building, and has been erected with the view of catering to the wants of residents and visitors who desire board and lodging, but who prefer the privacy of a boarding establishment, to hotels ... The building contains altogether 26 rooms for the accommodation of the public ... The dining-rooms are large and airy, the sitting rooms, comfortable and cosy ... As the weekly and daily charges are moderate, the Echuca Coffee Palace should be a boon to working men, a convenience to travellers and visitors, and a source of comfort to all.ⁱ

By the 1880s Echuca, established in 1850 on the Murray River between the states of Victoria and New South Wales, was the largest inland port in Australia, with a direct rail link to Melbourne and the hub of the burgeoning paddle steamer trade. Described by the *Australian Handbook* of 1875 as 'the entrepot of the intercolonial trade', its permanent population of 1700 was regularly swelled by sellers and buyers in the cattle, wool, and red-gum timber markets.ⁱⁱ These 'travellers and visitors' were well-accommodated in several hotels listed in the *Handbook*. So what was different enough about the Coffee Palace to merit this article in the main body of the regional newspaper? Unsaid but commonly understood by this time was that a 'coffee palace' was alcohol free: no sales and no consumption on the premises. The origin of the palaces was the temperance movements both in the United Kingdom and in Australia.

Coffee and Temperance

While abstaining from alcohol had long been an individual choice a formal temperance movement began in the United Kingdom in the early 1830s. Its focus was working-class men and the public houses in which they met and drank. The movement brought together religious crusaders, social reformers, and industrialists. Abstinence was an established tenet of some Evangelical religionists who took their direction from St Paul, that "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended or made weak." The reformers wanted to 'save' the working class from the criminality, poverty, child neglect and abuse and domestic violence they saw as consequent on excessive drinking. The industrialists were concerned at the impact on work in the rapidly expanding factories that depended on 'punctual, alert and efficient factory workers'.ⁱⁱⁱ

The temperance movement in Australia was established shortly after its inception in the United Kingdom. A temperance society was established in Melbourne in 1837, the Melbourne Total Abstinence Society in 1842, the Independent Order of Rechabites established a chapter in Australia in 1847 and the Sons of Temperance began in 1864. In 1885, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union set up branches in Queensland, New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, and Victoria. By the 1890s there were 70,000 members of these organisations in Australia. As in the United Kingdom, the initial focus for activity was working class men.

Temperance societies in both countries recognised, as the Manchester and Salford Temperance Society wrote in the *Star of Temperance* for September 1835, 'the importance of not only persuading the drunkard to leave those dangerous places of resort, the public-houses and beer and gin shops, but the imperative necessity of providing them with suitable and innocent places of amusement as substitutes'.^{iv} Like other groups, they proposed a range of strategies including 'establishing in various parts of the town coffee-houses and eating-houses' and 'reading-rooms, either separately or in conjunction with coffee-houses, supplied with generally useful books'.^v

The coffee house itself was not something new. The first opened in London in the middle of the 17th century. It was coffee's qualities as a stimulant that did not cloud the judgement that made it a fit drink for men (and it was always men) to refresh themselves with while reading newspapers and pamphlets, doing business deals, and catching up on political gossip. Former physician Phillip Muskett wrote in *The Art of Living in Australia*, his detailed description and critique of colonial Australian eating habits. 'Coffee has a decidedly stimulating effect upon the nervous system, so much so that in France it has been called *une boisson intellectual* (an intellectual beverage) from its stimulating all functions of the brain ... One of its most remarkable effects is that of relieving the feelings of fatigue or exhaustion, whether this be produced by brain work or bodily labour. It enables the system also to bear up under an empty stomach and when the supply of food is shortened'.^{vi} A Covent Garden coffee house is the scene of much political discussion in Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*, the novel set against the background of the anti-papist Gordon Riots of 1780.

By the 1870s coffee shops had also opened in cities and towns in Australia and coffee barrows were also part of the urban streetscape. Temperance groups in Australia also took up the coffee house strategy. The Tasmanian Women's Christian Temperance Union, for example, established a number across the state. 'It was reported in 1894 at the Annual Convention [at Penguin, on the north coast of Tasmania] that: 'Much good has been done by means of the coffee room ... by keeping young men out of temptation's way on Saturday evenings.' Similar success was reported at Richmond, Sheffield, Derby and Duck's Marsh ... Many of the coffee rooms were reported to have been successful in summer but enjoyed less patronage over the winter, when many of the rooms closed ... Burnie members reported [in 1897] that their coffee room was used frequently by thirty-three men, twenty-five of them having signed the pledge. Sheffield reported a new hall and coffee room being erected by the WCTU, which included a lending library with temperance literature.'^{vii}

It was not long, however, before temperance groups in the United Kingdom recognised that coffee rooms had limited serviceability in keeping the working class from 'the public-houses and beer and gin shops'. The solution was the temperance hotel, the first of which opened in January 1832 in Preston. In December The Preston Temperance Advocate listed the desirable amenities of this and other temperance houses that were being established: a 'respectable' eating house, a 'respectable' lodging house to provide alternative accommodation to the public house, and, as in the regular coffee houses, a place 'where persons can come to transact business, read the papers, or enjoy social intercourse, or where parties, societies and committees can meet for similar purposes'.^{viii} They would also, of course, provide better opportunities for more sustained proselytising.

The 'Coffee House Movement' in Australia

There was frequent travel between The United Kingdom and Australia by this time as fully steamed powered ships cut the voyage from an average of four months in 1850 to 42 days, a record set by *Aberdeen* in 1881. News of developments in the United Kingdom correspondingly arrived sooner - by personal and business mail, the London newspapers and with individuals visiting the colonies for personal or business reasons.

In 1878 meetings to establish coffee houses were held in Sydney and Melbourne, the capital cities of the two largest states, New South Wales and Victoria respectively. Mr. R. Murray Smith, chairing a meeting 28 December 1878 at Prahran, a working-class suburb of Melbourne, to establish the Prahran Home and Coffee House Company told those assembled that the 'coffee-house movement was one in which teetotallers and moderate drinkers could take an equal interest. The object of the movement was to improve the social and moral condition of the people; and if the working classes desired the amelioration of their own class, they ought to give their best assistance to promote the object'.^{ix} That the working class should do something for themselves was also a theme in the

temperance movement in the United Kingdom. 'Those who did not make a conscious effort to redeem themselves from lowly social stature and to improve their education and personal development, were labelled failures. ... Temperance was viewed as a way for these men to counter the accusation that they were lazy and prove that they did have self-respect and cared about their social status'.^x

Like the coffee houses overseas, these local initiatives were to be established on a business basis. The directors of the Prahran venture aimed to raise capital of £5000 in 5000 shares of £1 each.^{xi} The Prahran Coffee Place began operating in 1880. At its ninth half yearly meeting in 1883, the company was able to report 'that the business of the company during the half year had proved remunerative, resulting in a profit of £449 3s 11d' and a dividend was paid at the rate of 8 per cent per annum on 5280 shares' and the directors said they were 'sanguine of being able to continue to pay a dividend for the future'.^{xii}

The Coffee Palace Decade

The coffee hotels in the United Kingdom were established in re-purposed buildings and were consequently limited in the comfort they offered. On 18 February, 1865, the *Manchester Times* reported the opening of an all-together different class of establishment, one that put the provision of temperance alternatives on a business footing, and which was aimed squarely at cashed-up commercial traveller, businessmen and holidaymakers.

Opening of the Trevelyan Hotel

The Trevelyan Temperance Hotel in Corporation Street built by the Temperance Hotel Company Limited was opened on Tuesday by a fashionable and successful soiree. There are on the ground floor, a large restaurant, very lofty, and lighted by eight windows; a commercial room, manager's office, tea rooms, dining room, lavatories, and that luxury which even temperate men sometimes require – a well-ventilated smoke room. On the next floor are coffee, billiard, bath and other rooms; and higher up, on different storeys, are some 60 bedrooms, and several private rooms for the accommodation of families. Of these rooms it may be said they are roomy, elegant, and well-furnished. The staircases and corridors are of stone, and great care has been taken in other ways to make the building fire-proof. The kitchen, below stairs, is fitted up with the newest apparatus, and from top to bottom of the house no expense has been spared. The exterior shows a handsome building in the Italian style, which is an ornament to Corporation Street and a credit to the architects, Messrs Clegg and Knowles of this city, whose design was selected out of a large number sent in for competition. The total cost of the building is about £17,000.^{xiii}

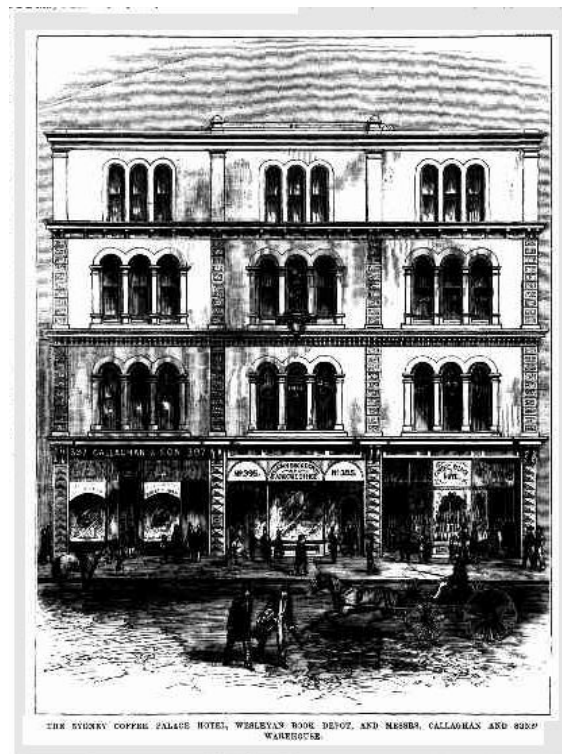
Again, while Australians would have heard of this development the initial ambitions of the coffee houses established for the working class were modest.

But Australia had been riding a booming economy since the gold rushes of the 1850s and from the second half of the 1860s until the end of the 1880s, writes political commentator George Megalogenis, 'Australia had no peer. It was not unusual for Australia's GDP per capita to be at least 20 percent larger than the next ranked nation, which was often the United Kingdom. By the late 1870s, Australia's advantage over the United States, which was still recovering from the civil war, had extended to more than 60 per cent'.^{xiv} The boom was driven by technological development. 'The colonies were becoming more accessible for trade through the steam engine, as the development of railways brought people and good together across the continent. New machines increased the productivity of the worker, so living standards continued to grow as the population expanded'.^{xv} The two economic powerhouse states (yet not federated, that would not happen till

1901) announced themselves on the world industrial stage at international exhibitions, New South Wales in 1879 and Victoria in 1880. To house these showcases of manufacturing and commerce, the Garden Palace was erected in Sydney in 1789 and the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne in 1880. More than a million people were expected to visit the exhibitions. Many would travel from non-metropolitan regions and from interstate. Many would be businessmen, industrialists and investors and would expect a high standard of hotel accommodation commensurate with the ambitions of the exhibition promoters. The conditions were perfect for the expansion into newer markets than the working class for the commercially oriented temperance leaders along the lines of the Trevelyan Hotel.

The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel opened in October 1879 in one of three adjoined warehouses on George Street, the city's main thoroughfare. Reporting on its opening on 4 October, *The Sydney Mail* enthused that among the members the company behind it 'are some of our keenest merchants and most persistent philanthropists, and they will not be easily beaten out of the path upon which they have entered. They mean to create a good thing in Sydney and will do it if it can be done'.^{xvi} While coffee places in England and those recently established in Victoria were intended for the 'artisan class', the paper continued, the Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel was 'a middle-class institution, and is framed especially to catch the very large number of respectably born and fairly cultured young men who are employed in the warehouses of the metropolis'. That the members saw it as a business investment is made clear by its objects:

1. To afford capital an eligible mode of investment which shall not be injurious to the morals and welfare of society.
2. To supply travellers and others with all the advantages, and without any of the disadvantages, of a first-class hotel, and at such a reasonable rate as will place those advantages within the reach of all.
3. To discourage the investment of capital in gin palaces and public houses by showing that it can be profitably employed in a more innocent way.^{xvii}



Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel 1879 (Photo: Sydney Daily Mail 4 October)

By 1881 there were two Sydney Palaces unimaginatively designated No 1, the original in George Street, and No 2 in Pitt Street.

In Melbourne, James Munro, temperance champion, land boom and property speculator, and the 15th Premier of Victoria from 1890 – 1892, bought the Grand Hotel in 1886, renamed it the Grand Coffee Palace and reputedly tore up its liquor license on the spot. On the eve the celebration of the centennial of the establishment of the first colony at Sydney Cove in 1888, Munro opened the purpose-built Federal Coffee Palace. The Federal was as grand as Munro's commercial and temperance ambitions, its façade, taking its inspiration from French Renaissance architecture, featured statues, griffins and Venus in a chariot drawn by four seahorses. The *Age* newspaper declared it 'by far the most splendid of its kind in the Australian colonies ... [whose] design possesses beauties which place it well up among colonial buildings of any kind'.^{xviii}

The amenities of the palaces in the two capital cities were much the same. In the Sydney Palace, the kitchen was in the basement and could turn out 'in 24 hours hot dinners for 2000 people' dominated by 'an immense range, built by Pullinger, of Melbourne, no less than 14 feet in length'. There was a steam-chest 'in which 500 plates can be kept hot without being burnt or blackened (as in ordinary stoves)', a bain-marie and requisite apparatus for cooking vegetables by steam'. There were also storerooms for groceries and crockery. 'It should also be mentioned that the steam and odours arising from the kitchen are carried outside the building at the rear, and do not annoy the occupants of the upper regions'.^{xix} Impressive as this kitchen was, it was outdone by that of Federal Palace which was, '60 feet square, with a range 28 feet long, furnished with the best appliances, and a separate hot water service. The pastry cook and the bakery occupy another apartment, 60 feet square, all the bread and pastry being baked on the premises. Boilers for hot water supply to the bathrooms, a refrigerating room for cooling purposes, stores and pantries, complete an important part of the hotel that is liberally provided for'.^{xx}



The Federal Coffee Palace (Photo: State library of Victoria)

The ground floor of the Sydney Palace had a bar with a lounge that served tea, coffee, 'American drinks', fruit, confectionery and a dining room for 100 people at a sitting where a plain meal, but of good quality, is served at 1s. per head. The table d'hôte in this room is much frequented'.^{xxi} There was a second dining room on the first floor which supplied 'an excellent plain dinner at the cheap rate of 1s. 6d., the meals in these rooms being served in a superior style, although the quality of the viands is similar to the quality of those served in the dining-room below'.^{xxii} The Federal Palace at street level also had a 'fine public dining hall, capable of seating 350 people and a larger dining hall on the first floor called the family or ladies' dining room, for the use of residents' which seated 150 people. The Federal Palace also had a 'ladies café' which in contrast was on the ground floor in the Federal Place accessed by a private entrance from a confectioners shop next door where 'light luncheons and all the delicacies of the season will be provided'.^{xxiv} The Sydney Palace had a 'ladies saloon' on the first floor to which men were allowed 'when they accompany ladies' and which was connected to a 'handsomely furnished retiring room, where ladies can arrange their toilet, read, write, or gossip. For brightness and comfort and spaciousness, the ladies' saloon is the finest apartment in the hotel'.^{xxv} Both had a smoking room for men, reading rooms and billiard rooms.

In both palaces the rest of the floors were given over to bedrooms, both single and double, with the Sydney Palace having 50 (let by the night 2., or by the week 10s 6d in advance^{xxvi}) and the Federal Palace having 400, making it the largest hotel in Melbourne at the time. The Federal Palace had four bridal suites whose 'furniture, bedding and ornaments are of the best description and most tastefully chosen. In fact these bridal suites are a direct bribe to matrimony'. It boasted a mansard roof from which guests could 'gaze away to the sea and the plains for 20 or 30 miles'.

The two palaces were open from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily with the dining rooms open between 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. At the Sydney Palace guests could order 'sandwiches, pastry, ices, fruit, compotes, aerated waters, and cigars, &c' till 11 p.m.^{xxviii}

By 1890 there were several coffee palaces in the capital cities of the states, 50 in Melbourne and its suburbs alone, and in rural commercial and agricultural hubs like Echuca, Mildura, and Horsham in Victoria and Goulburn, Parkers and Coffs Harbour in New South Wales. Munro had shares in the Broken Hill Coffee Palace established in the silver mining town in far west New South Wales. These latter were, like the Echuca Coffee Palace, of much more modest in size and fit-out. There also were coffee palaces in Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, and in Hobart, the capital of Tasmania.

The passing of the Palaces

But the boom of the 1880s was followed by one of the worst depressions in Australia's history. Investors in property and pastoral businesses had borrowed heavily from local banks that were in turn supported by banks in the United Kingdom. When the Baring Bank failed in England because of a crash in investments in Argentina, the crisis rapidly spread through the banking sector in the economic powerhouse states. Between April and May 1893 thirteen banks closed in Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland. Investors like Munro were financially ruined.

Where investors in the palaces had looked to a good return on their shares, they faced the reality that liquor was much the greater money-spinner. In 1895, at its nineteenth half-yearly ordinary general meeting, the financial report of the Federal Coffee Palace Company Limited to its shareholders showed a bare surplus of £226 11s 11d. The directors reported that they 'intended to continue their exertions of having an amendment in the Licencing Act and so give the Federal Coffee Palace the character of a first-class hotel; and hoped thereby in near future to be able to hand over to the shareholders a profitable concern'. The sole dissenting voice was Mr. H. S. Sutton who said, 'He would sooner lose the money he had put into the concern as a temperance institution than be a

party to obtaining a licence'.^{xxix} The motion was passed. The Grand Coffee Palace, Munro's other Melbourne venture, re-gained its liquor licence in 1897. The Broken Hill Coffee Palace ran at a loss for the first three years from 1889 – 1892. In July 1892 the lessee applied for and was granted a liquor license.^{xxx} Dropping the word 'coffee' was not a whim nor a requirement of licensing, it was strategic, as the Chairman of the Federal Coffee Palace made clear at a shareholders meeting in February 1897 saying 'that the object of the meeting was to submit certain special resolutions. The first was to alter the name of the Federal Coffee Palace Company Limited to the Federal Palace Hotel Limited. This was important, as the name coffee palace was not attractive to the travelling public'.^{xxxi}

The tactics of the temperance movement also were changing, led by women. Groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Australia (WCTU), following the example of similar organisations in the United States, turned their effort into the suffragist campaigns determined to exercise their vote against state liquor licensing laws. Between 1915 – 1919 the WCTU and other temperance organisation finally had a major victory. They had been lobbying since the early 1900s to extend the coverage of the states' Closing Acts, which mandated that commercial businesses must close at 6 p.m., to cover licensed hotels which at the time were able to remain open till 11 p.m. They were successful first in South Australia in 1915, and by 1919 all states had followed.

Most of the coffee palaces were demolished during the first half of the 20th century. The Grand Coffee Palace was granted a liquor license and, like others, dropped the reference to coffee palace from its name, changing back to the Grand. In 1920 it renewed itself as the Windsor hotel and continues now as a five-star heritage listed hotel. The Palace at Broken Hill also continues to operate having found fame when it featured in the 1994 Australian film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

ⁱ 'The Echuca Coffee Palace', *The Riverine Herald*, 24 December 1892, p. 1, trove.nla.gov.au, accessed 25 April 2019

ⁱⁱ victorianplaces.com.au/echuca accessed 22 August 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ Rebecca Smith, 'The Temperance Movement and Class Struggle in Victorian England', people.loyno.edu/~history/journal/1992-3 accessed 28 August 2021

^{iv} Davison Andrew, 'Try the alternative': the built heritage of the temperance movement', *Brewery History* Number 123 Summer 2006, pp. 99 - 100, breweryhistory.com/journal/archive/123/Temperance.pdf

^v Ibid

^{vi} Muskett, Phillip E., *The Art of Living in Australia*, 1893, p 71

^{vii} Jordan, Rene, 'White-Ribboners: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Tasmania, 1885 – 1914', A thesis submitted as part of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History School of History and Classics · University of Tasmania December 2001, p.14 eprints.utas.edu.au accessed 22 August

^{viii} Davison Andrew, 'Try the alternative': the built heritage of the temperance movement', *Brewery History* Number 123 Summer 2006, pp. 99 - 100, breweryhistory.com/journal/archive/123/Temperance.pdf

^{ix} 'The Coffee House Movement', *Weekly Times*, Saturday 28 December 1878 - Page 7, trove.nla.gov.au/ accessed 24 August 2021

^x Rebecca Smith, 'The Temperance Movement and Class Struggle in Victorian England', people.loyno.edu/~history/journal/1992-3 accessed 28 August 2021

^{xi} 'The Coffee House Movement', *Weekly Times*, Saturday 28 December 1878 - Page 7, trove.nla.gov.au/ accessed 24 August 2021

^{xii} 'The Prahran Coffee House', *The Argus*, Thursday 24 May 1883 - Page 3, trove.nla.gov.au/ accessed 29 August 2021

^{xiii} *Manchester Times* 18 February 1865 page 3, manchestervictorianarchitects.org.uk accessed 28 August 2021

^{xiv} Megalogenis, George, *Australia's Second Chance*, Penguin Random House, 2015, p. 121

^{xv} Ibid

^{xvi} 'The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel', *The Sydney Mail*, Saturday October 4, 1879, p. 552. trove.nla.gov.au accessed 21 August 2021

^{xvii} **ibid**

^{xviii} 'The Federal Coffee Palace', *The Age*, 30 July, 1888, p.8, newspapers.com, accessed 21 August 2021

^{xix} 'The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel', *The Sydney Mail*, Saturday October 4, 1879, p. 552. trove.nla.gov.au accessed 21 August 2021

^{xx} 'The Federal Coffee Palace', *The Age*, 30 July, 1888, p.8, newspapers.com, accessed 21 August 2021

^{xxi} 'The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel', *The Sydney Mail*, Saturday October 4, 1879, p. 552. trove.nla.gov.au accessed 21 August 2021

^{xxii} 'The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel', *The Sydney Mail*, Saturday October 4, 1879, p. 552. trove.nla.gov.au accessed 21 August 2021

^{xxiii} 'The Federal Coffee Palace', *The Age*, 30 July, 1888, p.8, newspapers.com, accessed 21 August 2021

^{xxiv} 'The Federal Coffee Palace', *The Age*, 30 July, 1888, p.8, newspapers.com, accessed 21 August 2021

^{xxv} 'The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel', *The Sydney Mail*, Saturday October 4, 1879, p. 552. trove.nla.gov.au accessed 21 August 2021

^{xxvi} 'The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel', *The Sydney Mail*, Saturday October 4, 1879, p. 552. trove.nla.gov.au accessed 21 August 2021

^{xxvii} 'The Federal Coffee Palace', *The Age*, 30 July, 1888, p.8, newspapers.com, accessed 21 August 2021

^{xxviii} 'The Sydney Coffee Palace Hotel', *The Sydney Mail*, Saturday October 4, 1879, p. 552. trove.nla.gov.au accessed 21 August 2021

^{xxix} 'Federal Coffee Palace', *The Age*, 23 March, 1895, p. 5, nla.gov.au/ accessed 21 August 2021

^{xxx} 'The History of the Palace Hotel Broken Hill', thepalacehotelbrokenhill.com.au, accessed 4 September 2021

^{xxxi} 'Change to Hotel', *The Argus*, 25 February, 1897, p. 7, trove.nla.gov.au, accessed 28 August 2021