Book review

WANTED, A BEAUTIFUL BARMAID: WOMEN BEHIND THE BAR IN NEW ZEALAND, 1830-1976
Susan Upton
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Given New Zealanders’ proclivity towards drinking, this investigation into the history of women and liquor regulation is a pertinent read. Beginning in the 1830s, *Wanted, a beautiful barmaid*, traces antagonism towards women behind the bar which climaxes in the abolition of the fairer sex from the profession in 1910. Far from a one-sided affair, the book also highlights the affection a drinking community could have for ‘their’ barmaid, as was the case with publican Rebecca Tabor, elected as vice-president of her patrons’ rugby club in Masterton. It is somewhere between these legislative restrictions and overly enthusiastic patrons, where Upton’s barmaids and female publicans negotiated spaces in which they could support themselves and their families. The book also traces the slippery legislative slope leading to women’s full reinstatement behind the bar in 1976, demonstrating that ‘progress’ in this case, was largely the removal of legislative restrictions that had always run counter to the preferences of the drinking communities themselves.

In a sense this is a well overdue book. It was 1997 when Diane Kirkby uncovered the story of women’s work in pubs in Australia in her *Barmaids: A history of women’s work in pubs*. But Upton’s work is not simply a New Zealand partner to Kirkby’s, as its focus is far less on the role of the barmaid and drinking culture in the development of a national identity, and more on the legislative bombardment which confronted women seeking to support themselves and their families through participation in the liquor trade. Upton’s book is also able to situate the experiences of New Zealand barmaids within the international historiography, grounding the research at key points in a wider frame of reference extending to Kirkby’s Australia, and also Canada. Upton positions her narrative against other tomes of New Zealand women’s history as well, thus not only uncovering the historical relationship between women, alcohol, and legislation in this country, but also contributing to the development of our understanding of New Zealand’s position in the world and also women’s position within New Zealand. Chapters cover the unrestricted grog shops of the mid-1800s, the feisty barmaids of the gold rushes of the 1860s and 1870s, the perceived moral threat the profession posed to women on the frontier, anti-barmaid campaigns led by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the growing popularity of prohibition and its effects on women in the liquor trade, the introduction of surveillance via the barmaids register, the war and six o’clock closing, and attempts by legislators and union alike to control barmaids during the 1960s and 1970s, respectively. Where drinking culture is considered a traditionally man’s world, Upton’s work usefully demonstrates that liquor is a women’s history too.
While the research for this social history was wide-ranging, personal accounts are often missing. We gain a brief and all the more valuable and rare insight into the personal letters of Ellen Piezzi, working near Hokitika from 1878-1881, but much of the early narrative is presented from the outside looking in. Parliamentarians discuss working hours and the appropriate gender of drink-pouring, while criminal reports identify the bolshy women who participated in male bastions of New Zealand culture despite legislative restriction. A pair of barmaids wrote to the newspapers in 1884 decrying the slander thrown against them, and in 1910 Anne Carr and a handful of others engaged in correspondence with the Secretary of Labour concerning registration as barmaids, but these are small feminine voices in a much larger masculine wilderness. This is until the later decades of the book, where daughters of barmaids and publicans, and finally the barmaids and publicans themselves, are interviewed.

To the extent that nineteenth-century working women, sometimes illiterate and seldom with the wherewithal to document their experiences, have their story told here at all is a testament to Upton’s commitment to trawling through archives and legislation to piece together this history, largely through the restrictions and controls which the liquor trade placed against them. Women’s history, particularly when it falls under the umbrella of social history, seeks to find the untold story, reclaiming the history of those whose experiences escape the mainstream national mythology. As such, Upton has had to negotiate silences in the archives to uncover the story of the New Zealand barmaid, and she has done so effectively. While the richness of a more personal account would have enabled greater insight into the experiences of women caught under the gaze of the law for no reason other than their sex, historians are always tied to their sources, and Upton finds much to bring the stories of her subjects’ collective lives to light, if not always in their own words.

Overall Upton’s *Wanted, a beautiful barmaid*, successfully traces legislative and attitudinal changes towards barmaids and female publicans throughout the period, but what this left me with, was the question ‘why’; why was the work of a barmaid or publican considered (albeit contentiously) feminine in some decades and not in others. By the time all remaining legal restrictions against women working behind the bar are removed in 1976, the work of bar staff is considered in some circles to be sufficiently taxing that it can only be undertaken by men. Was this simply a knee-jerk reaction due to fear over job losses if women were reintroduced on equal footing with men into the industry as Upton surmises? Had the nature of bartending actually changed since women poured beer on the goldfields, or was it wider attitudinal changes towards gender norms that caused such a shift? Why were there such shifts? What drove them? While fears over prostitution masquerading as bartending clearly directs much that wends its way through New Zealand’s relationship with the barmaid and the female publican, the book left me wondering what the larger social and gendered norms were which drove these fluctuations in behaviour and legislation. While a narrative which contextualised these shifts against wider gender norms more thoroughly would have satisfied my intrigue, it is not exactly a weakness to find a book leaving you wanting more. Having read Upton’s work on the history of women’s clubs some time ago, I was pleased to see that this book was now in print, and am equally pleased to find that it proves to be just as superb a resource for those with an interest in women’s history as her earlier work was.

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**References**