

GAMING AND BETTING IN AUSTRALIA, 1788 - 1983

Summary

This study traces the history of gaming and betting in Australia from 1788 to 1983 with the objectives of examining the development and changing nature of these gambling practices in Australia, and of analysing the attitudes of Australian society towards them.

The study demonstrates that the gambling practices transplanted from Britain became entrenched in a colonial society which was not subject to the pressure of industrialisation, urbanisation and the reforming values of a new urban middle class. Gaming and betting were pursued vigorously by the lower classes and by the gentry, whose patronage and supervision of gambling helped provide the practices with an air of legitimacy.

By the end of the nineteenth century a vocal middle-class reform movement, with urban and protestant based values, advocated reforms which would outlaw the established gambling practices. But this group achieved little, until an increasing public profile for gaming and betting, due to the emergence of gambling entrepreneurs, and a weakening of gentry political influence combined with the changed political structure of post-federation Australia, created a climate conducive to moral reform.

Despite a series of legislative restrictions in the first decade after federation, the laws concerning gaming and betting have been increasingly liberalised throughout the twentieth century. Governments have recognized the revenue potential of gambling, the fact that most Australians have little objection to gaming and betting, and that governments need to supervise gambling - in order to guard against corruption and organised crime.

In liberalising Australian gambling laws, twentieth century governments have accepted the value system of the Australian working classes, and rejected those of the economically and apparently politically dominant urban middle class.

GAMING AND BETTING IN AUSTRALIA 1788-1983

A Social and Cultural Analysis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	(i)
ABBREVIATIONS	(ii)
PREFACE	(iv)
 <u>SECTION I - FRAMEWORK AND TRADITIONS</u>	
Chapter One: Introduction: Definitions, Concepts and a Framework for Analysis.	1
Chapter Two: The Colonial Inheritance of Gambling Practices and Traditions, 1788-1820.	12
 <u>SECTION II - COLONIAL GAMBLING</u>	
Chapter Three: The Establishment of Colonial Gambling Practices, 1820-1850	53
Chapter Four: Expansion and Entrenchment, 1850-1880	103
 <u>SECTION III - REFORM AND RESTRICTION</u>	
Chapter Five: The Challenge to Gaming and Betting, 1880-1900	153
Chapter Six: Wovser Reforms, 1900-1916	218
 <u>SECTION IV - WORKING-CLASS HEGEMONY</u>	
Chapter Seven: The Liberalisation of Gaming and Betting, 1916-1983	280
Chapter Eight: Working-Class Hegemony, Taxation Revenue or State Control?	345
CONCLUSIONS	400

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Twentieth Century
Government Inquiries
Related to Gaming and
Betting. 411

Appendix B: Gaming and Betting
(and related)
Acts. 414

BIBLIOGRAPHY 432

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.D.B.	Australian Dictionary of Biography.
A.I.F.	Australian Infantry Force.
A.J.C.	Australian Jockey Club.
A.L.P.	Australian Labor Party.
A.P.D.A.	Australian Protestant Defence Association.
A.R.C.	Associated Racing Clubs.
A.R.J.C.	Australian Racing and Jockey Club.
B.A.T.C.	Brisbane Amateur Turf Club.
H.R.A.	Historical Records of Australia.
L.R.A.	Liberal and Reform Association.
N.S.W.P.D.	New South Wales Parliamentary Debates.
N.S.W.P.P.	New South Wales Parliamentary Papers.
N.S.W.T.C.	New South Wales Trotting Club.
Q.P.P.	Queensland Parliamentary Papers.
Q.T.C.	Queensland Turf Club.
R.S.L.	Returned Services League.

R.S.P.C.A.	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.
S.A.J.C.	South Australian Jockey Club.
S.A.P.P.	South Australia Parliamentary Papers.
S.P.	Starting Price.
S.T.C.	Sydney Turf Club.
T.A.B.	Totalisator Agency Board.
Tatt's	Tattersall's.
T.P.P.	Tasmania Parliamentary Papers.
T.R.C.	Tasmanian Racing Club.
T.T.C.	Tasmanian Turf Club.
V.A.T.C.	Victorian Amateur Turf Club.
V.P.P.	Victoria Parliamentary Papers
V.R.C.	Victoria Racing Club.
V.T.R.A.	Victorian Trotting and Racing Association.

Australians have long thought of themselves as a nation of gamblers - perhaps even the world's greatest gamblers. The belief that typical Australians "would bet on two flies crawling up a wall" is even part of our folklore. Accordingly gambling, in its many forms, has fascinated the nation's general writers: poets, novelists, journalists and contemporary commentators - but not serious students of history. My study is the first attempt to examine the history of gambling in Australia.

The focus of the study is a history of gaming and betting in Australia, from the time of white settlement until 1983. But it also provides an opportunity to analyse Australian social and cultural attitudes from new perspectives. The significance of a history of gaming and betting might not be apparent to those historians who view gambling as a narrow and even trivial field of social activity. I believe my study shows that this is not the case: gaming and betting, although minor activities for most people, do have a significant place in Australian culture, and a history of these practices and society's attitudes towards them can reveal much about Australian society and culture.

This study provides a detailed account of the nature and extent of Australian gaming and betting practices in order to examine the expression of attitudes they aroused and the values they reflected. It is not an analysis of the growth of a major national industry, nor an analysis of the national psyche. It is not concerned fundamentally with explanation of why Australians are, or consider themselves to be,

a nation of gamblers. Nor is it concerned with measuring the validity of this belief, any more than it is concerned with other myths and legends.

Nevertheless, the history of gaming and betting provides a perspective from which we can examine the nature of and changing relationship between social groups ascribing to different sets of values. It also provides a new perspective for analysis of religion and the role of the churches in Australian history, and of the changing role and interests of government during the two centuries of Australian settlement.

The majority of Australian histories have been written from a 'government house verandah' perspective or based on values and assumptions held by only a small section of society - the literate and those educationally and economically advantaged and imbued with protestant values and morality. Even Australia's working-class histories have seldom ventured beyond the narrow political or institutional boundaries. This work attempts to go beyond such orthodox boundaries, by studying an important aspect of social behaviour and social relationships, and examining something of the value systems of many other Australians. It is hoped that this study will provide the basis for a fresh analysis of Australian social and cultural history.

The study is organised chronologically into four sections, each consisting of two chapters. The first section begins with an

introduction which defines terms and concepts important to the analysis and explains the framework and the major analytical tools to be used in the study. This is followed, in Chapter Two, by examination of the relevant practices, attitudes and social context of late eighteenth century Britain, their transplantation to the Australian colonies, and their development in the early colonial context, to about 1820.

Section Two focuses on analysis of the practices and attitudes which developed in colonial society to about 1880. The division between the two chapters in this section is drawn at about 1850; with Chapter Three focusing on developments within a pastoral society and Chapter Four focusing on the gold rush and post gold era of economic boom.

Section Three is concerned with analysis of the period from about 1880 to about 1916; an era of increasing urbanisation, industrialisation and commercialisation, and of increasing social and political complexity. This section is divided into two chapters concerned respectively with the final decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, reflecting in part the different political structures of colonial and federated Australia, providing different political contexts for both gaming and betting developments and the analysis.

The final section examines gaming and betting practices and attitudes in Australia since the first world war. In this section the

dividing line between the chapters is not chronological, but is determined by the structure of the analysis. Chapter Seven examines the growth of gaming and betting in this era and Chapter Eight focuses on interpretation of government attitudes and actions.

The periodisation adopted in this study is approximate rather than absolute. The lines of division are not intended to imply definitive demarcation marking sudden or definite changes in practices, attitudes or values. Social history, unlike other forms of the discipline, is not as susceptible to the influence of single events or "great men", and ideas or values pervade eras across chronological boundaries. Their transition and modification are continual, gradual processes, even though perhaps highlighted at times by a particular event or personality. Accordingly, the chronological division applied in this study is intended to suggest eras during which some significant change in either ideas, values or practices related to gaming and betting is discernable.¹

The study ranges over almost two centuries of Australia's history and reaches back even further into pre-modern Britain. In this respect it is untypical of the modern doctoral thesis, which tends to examine more closely a much more confined period. Justification of my approach however, lies firstly in the fact that this is a pioneering study for

¹ For further justification of such periodisation see Peter N. Stearns, European Society in Upheaval, New York, 1975, p.8 and Rober F. Berkhofer, "Clio and the Culture Concept", in L. Schneider and C.M. Bonjean (eds.), The Idea of Culture in the Social Sciences, Cambridge 1973, p.89.

Australia. Because I am the first to attempt an historical study of Australian gambling, I believe a broad sweep is justified. Furthermore the study analyses social and cultural beliefs, values and attitudes, which change only over considerable time periods. Such analysis cannot be confined to a decade or two; and if the study is less exhaustive because of its breadth, perhaps it will have value to later students who can refine it.

I do not propose here to discuss in detail the existing literature on the history of gambling, because such discussion is largely integral to the study which follows. However, it should be stressed here that except for a few recent works on horse racing and a handful of relatively recent journal articles by historians of Britain and the United States, the history of gambling has generally been left to the enthusiastic amateur who has invariably concentrated on anecdotes about the "great gamblers" and their exploits on the Mississippi, the Riviera or in Las Vegas.²

Apart from the tendency of serious scholars to dismiss this form of social activity as trivial, a major reason for the relative lack of serious historical study of the phenomenon probably lies in the difficulties associated with constructing a framework for analysis and of defining the focus of study. These difficulties are confronted in the introduction which follows.

² For example, H. Chafez, Play the Devil: A History of Gambling in the United States from 1492 to 1955, New York 1960; G. Devol, and B. Goldblatt, The Only Game in Town: An illustrated History of Gambling, New York 1976.