

*Wanted, a Beautiful Barmaid: Women Behind the Bar in New Zealand, 1830-1976*

By Susan Upton.

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Reviewed by Paul Christoffel

Historically, New Zealand's liquor laws were influenced by what might usefully be labelled the 'temptation theory' of alcohol - the notion that people drink primarily because of temptations placed before them. More recent theories suggest that societal factors play a greater role, and that people are primarily influenced by the behaviour of those around them. But in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century the temptation theory held sway. In the words of one Member of the House of Representatives in 1881, 'drinking diminishes when temptations are removed'. Removing temptations generally included reducing the number of bars and the hours they were allowed to open, and eliminating 'inducements' such as games, musical entertainment, and free food.

This provides an important context to the anti-barmaid campaign that is central to Susan Upton's enjoyable social history of women behind the bars of New Zealand's hotels. As her book shows, women were portrayed by prohibitionists as the sirens who lured helpless young men into dens of iniquity. In the words of one prohibitionist campaigner, Anna Stout, many young men 'would never dream of going into a bar if a man was serving'. Removing the temptation provided by the cheerful sensuality of the barmaid would diminish the lure of the demon drink. The title to *Wanted a Beautiful Barmaid* comes from a temperance poem satirizing the supposed proclivity of bar owners to deliberately hire attractive young women to encourage custom. Barmaids were the target of an extended campaign by prohibitionists and temperance advocates. New barmaids were eventually abolished in 1910, a ban that lasted over 50 years.

The author argues that the temperance attack on barmaids was at times contradictory. On one hand they were claimed to be wicked temptresses. On the other hand they were often portrayed as fragile and vulnerable, thus needing protection (by exclusion) from the rough language and other unpleasant aspects of bar work. The anti-barmaid campaign was primarily driven by women, particularly through organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Upton shows that this led to debate within the women's movement. As one WCTU member wrote in 1907, the movement should be 'agitating for the removal of restrictions on women's employment, not further restrictions'. Such views, however, were in a minority. When national referendums on prohibition were introduced from 1911, roughly half the population voted for prohibition until the late 1920s, with support from women thought to be even higher. Removing the temptations that encouraged drinking was therefore a priority for many. Upton also argues that the WCTU considered home and family to be central to a civilized society. Working in bars was a threat to a woman's moral well-being, potentially undermining family life. My own research indicates that liquor industry representatives also saw women as the main supporters of the barmaid ban. The industry eventually supported it in 1910 because they considered the move would reduce female support for prohibition in the electorate polls then held every three years. Wives would be less likely to vote for prohibition, it was argued, when they were no longer jealous of their husbands spending their evenings in female company.

The book includes a lively and informative chapter on the gold mining era, in some ways a golden age for barmaids. Barmaids were in high demand and short supply, and were thus paid more than their male counterparts. With plenty of men to choose from, many quickly married and moved on, maintaining the shortage. Upton notes that bar work was generally a well-paid occupation for women, although she appears ambivalent about the merits of the job. She points to the often long hours barmaids were required to work, stating that they often began at 8 am. She does not discuss the reasons for bar staff starting work at such an early hour, and this would have been an interesting subject for further exploration.

Another highlight is the chapter on the barmaids register, illustrating the extent to which the state was willing to meddle in matters that today we would consider beyond its purview. After new barmaids (apart from the publican's family members) were banned in 1910, a register of existing barmaids was established to prevent them being thrown out of work. The register allowed those employed as barmaids in 1910 to continue bar work, or take it up again. This created a Kafkaesque situation where barmaids had their credentials to work in the trade scrutinized by Labour department bureaucrats. As the register was not set up until 1912, it was often difficult for women to provide the requisite proof of their employment in 1910, and many missed out on registration. One 40-year old woman pleaded with the authorities to be allowed to register, but was eventually rejected because she had last worked in a bar in 1909, not 1910. Over time, the population of registered barmaids aged, until by the 1940s most were over 50. There were still one or two elderly registered barmaids at work by the time barmaids were reinstated in 1962.

Despite the book's title, the author extends the subject matter to encompass the place of women who held hotel licences, not just those employed as barmaids. Her book therefore includes interesting accounts of the efforts of women to make a living by running hotels, many of whom did so with great success despite the legal barriers they faced. Upton outlines the legal decisions of the late 1880s which, due to ambiguous wording in the 1881 *Licensing Act*, led to the courts finding that married women could not hold a liquor license. As licenses needed to be renewed annually, this decision placed the livelihood of many families in jeopardy. Unfortunately her account fails to note that in 1889, parliament amended the *Licensing Act* provisions relating to married women. Firstly, it ensured that existing married license-holders were able to continue having their licenses renewed annually and could thus continue to ply their trade. Second, abandoned wives and the like were expressly permitted to obtain hotel licenses. However, all other married women were debarred from obtaining a license. As Australian historian Clare Wright has shown, when faced with a similar legal situation in the colony of Victoria, parliament legislated to protect not only existing license holders, but also the right of married women to obtain hotel licenses. Not only did New Zealand fail to follow suit, but under the *Alcohol Liquors Sale Control Act 1893*, parliament removed the ability of unmarried women, other than widows, to obtain hotel licenses. Thus, from 1893 until 1952, the only women who could obtain hotel licenses were widows and wives unsupported by their husbands.

Although her book mentions this 1893 reform, Upton goes on to claim incorrectly that the banning of female license-holders took place 15 years later, in 1908. She also omits to mention that existing female license-holders, both married and unmarried, were always protected from the legal restrictions. The book thus leaves the reader with the impression that the law changes led to significant numbers of women losing their liquor licenses. In actual

fact many women did lose their licenses in the early twentieth century, but not for the reason that Upton asserts. The true explanation is the increasing success of the prohibition and temperance lobby in the regular licensing polls held in every electorate. These enabled voters to force the closure of 58 hotel bars in July 1906 and a further 107 bars in July 1909. A disproportionate number of those who lost their licenses were women, who had previously been largely protected from the regular bar closures forced by the liquor polls.

These errors and misinterpretations of evidence are very much the exception in what is otherwise a well researched book. Others have also made the mistake of incorrectly attributing reforms to the *Licensing Act 1908*, which was actually a consolidating statute that made no changes to the law. Instead, it incorporated a large body of existing legislation, including the *Alcohol Liquors Sale Control Act 1893*, into a single new Act. New Zealand's liquor laws have always been horrendously complex, leaving many traps for unwary researchers.

It can be seen from this book that the various legislative provisions that restricted the ability of women to own hotel businesses, and to work in pubs, actually had limited effect. As the author notes, most women employed in the industry were family members of license-holders and managers. There were never any restrictions on the wives and daughters of publicans working behind the bar, and the definition of family was often extended by licensing committees to include other relatives. Prohibitionists never seem to have considered that the daughters of publicans might entice helpless young men into bars, or be in need of protection from their unhealthy environment. Upton shows that the reason the barmaid ban lasted 50 years had less to do with these prohibitionist concerns, and more to do with the competition barmaids provided to men as wage-earners and as family bread-winners. By the 1950s it was the trade unions, rather than the dwindling temperance faction, who wanted the ban to remain. Even when barmaids were allowed again in 1962, they had to be over 25 and their employment was restricted by the unions. It was only with the extension of opening hours in 1967, and a legislative change in 1976 removing the age restriction, that barmaids achieved legal equality with their male counterparts.

Minor errors aside, *Wanted, a Beautiful Barmaid* is a fascinating and thoroughly researched social history written in a lively and informative style. The book is extensively illustrated, which may account for its price. I would recommend it to anyone interested in the place of and attitudes towards women in New Zealand society, or indeed anyone with a general interest in this country's social history.