

Reviews and Notices

Two Over Three on Good Time Sugar: the New Zealand TAB turns 50.

David Grant.

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Ever bet on a double, or a win and a place? More the quinella or trifecta type? Are you an 'easy bet' or would you rather more promiscuously 'pick 6'. In recent years you might like to watch on 'trackside'. You are of course availing yourself of the products and services of the TAB, or (for those of you who are unaware of what the acronym stands for) the 'Totalisator Agency Board.'

Often heralded as a New Zealand invention, the TAB, as David Grant tells us, was established as a quango to ward off the evils of the 'bookie'. There was a time when the image of the bookie conjured up sly, furtive, and illicit activity that today has few comparisons. Some things are still illegal, but flouting the law does not seem to shock the middle classes in quite the way that it once did. Much of the rationale behind the formation of the TAB was to bring in the ostracised — and perhaps dispel this expression of illicit male passion. Certainly the story Grant tells is one that reeks of old pipe tobacco and raw testosterone. One of the images of a throng of punters in the Auckland TAB in 1952 is telling. This almost exclusively male muster of punters is archetypal New Zealand before the days of 'customer focus'. No one was being asked to 'have a nice day' and yet I suspect that most of them were, even if you do not get that from their countenance.

The TAB was a bastion of male companionship — mateship if you like. Early TABs were located out of sight behind shops, largely, it would seem, to keep their presence out of the view of those with weak sensibilities. These agencies were cosseted havens for those who had at least one thing in common — the desire to have a flutter.

The masculinity of the TAB glares out at you from the black and white photographs of the early boards. Those early male elites were attired to show wealth, conservatism and a high degree of uniformity (see page 48 in particular). Such conformity now seems curious after decades of political and social deregulation.

In solving the moral dilemma associated with covert gambling, the Crown created a highly profitable entity, gave it a monopoly on off-course betting, and used the arm of the state to enforce compliance. It is a scenario that seems totally at ease within its context — and one that would be inconceivable today. The TAB is certainly a product of its history and this is sufficient justification, if any was needed, for such an in depth study.

David Grant follows the enormous changes that have occurred to what was once an icon of New Zealand nationalism. We wrote songs about it all! Remember *Rugby Racing and Beer*? Well the Rugby is now packaged and marketed like fast food and the beer barons no longer dominate New Zealand society quite as much as they once did. (Well, even if they still do, at least the beer is better.) The TAB's standing has also changed. It has slumped in the national consciousness, even though we still bet a lot of money through the TAB. Today it is one of a number of businesses involved in 'the gaming industry'. At the same time the moral crusade against gambling has moved its focus towards the ubiquitous and addictive 'pokie' machines.

Grant has previously written *On a Roll: A History of Gambling and Lotteries* in 1994, in which he attempts a serious discussion of the wider impact of gambling in our social history, but that kind of analysis is mainly absent here. This is an institutional history in the narrower sense. Of the twenty-five chapters, twenty-four have the acronym TAB in the title — the only one that does not is 'betting on the internet'. One wonders if this is a mark of respect for technology that could have us all placing our bets overseas?

Throughout his detailed narrative, Grant conveys a sense of [page 75](#) loss in respect of those earlier times. He highlights the perceived moral righteousness of a TAB that tamed male passions and provided funds to help keep the social welfare society rolling along. Such a myth no longer explains current relationships and the vacuum left by its collapse raises a series of questions about who owns this rather curious beast and what do we do with it now.

The text dominates the format of this publication. It is conservatively laid out yet handsomely bound in hardback. I particularly appreciated the collection of cartoons, but would have liked to see them used and displayed more prominently. *Two Over Three On Good Time Sugar* is not a 'tight read' but it is a valuable contribution to New Zealand social history and to the ongoing development of the gaming industry.

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