

REVIEW ESSAYS

TALES WE WIN: RECENT WORKS ON THE HISTORY OF GAMBLING IN AUSTRALIA

P. Charlton, *Two Flies Up a Wall: The Australian Passion for Gambling*. Methuen Haynes, North Ryde, 1987, pp.289. \$12.95 paperback;
J. O'Hara, *A Mug's Game: A History of Gaming and Betting in Australia*. N.S.W. University Press, Kensington, 1988, pp.285. \$29.95 cased, \$14.95 paperback; M. Walker, *Faces of Gambling: Proceedings of the Second National Conference of the National Association for Gambling Studies*. NAGS, Sydney, 1987, pp.315. \$31.00.

For many years Australian historians have neglected gambling. It may have warranted a passing mention, usually in a form which reinforced the view promulgated by nineteenth century visitors that Australia was a nation of gamblers, but the evidence presented was rarely new and certainly no serious research was undertaken. Times have changed. A National Association for Gambling Studies, with the appropriate acronym of NAGS, has been established and has just published the proceedings of its second conference. This *Faces of Gambling*, has been accompanied by the almost simultaneous publication of two major histories of gambling in Australia, John O'Hara's *A Mug's Game*, a revision of his New England doctorate, and Peter Charlton's more journalistic *Two Flies Up a Wall*.

The nature of the source material on the history of gambling has not aided serious study. Much of the contemporary published literature such as parliamentary papers, newspaper reportage, pamphlets and tracts is prejudiced in that it is dominated by the opponents of gambling. Hence the user has to assess whether the evidence presented is typical or a worst case scenario. Fortunately burgeoning biographical research has at least enabled identification of the political opportunist, the zealot and the naive. The success of the opponents of gambling has meant that many gambling activities have, at various times, been illegal in Australia and this has resulted in a lack of documentation by those who participated in the ensuing clandestine gaming. It has also led to great problems in quantifying the volume of gambling which has occurred: the debate between O'Hara and Bryan Haig in the November 1985 issue

of *Sporting Traditions* is clear testimony to the difficulty of counting bets when many of them are verbal transactions in the front bar or on illegal telephones.

The deficiencies in the data were such as to be seen by too many historians as an obstacle, Not till O'Hara began work on his doctorate was the intellectual challenge posed by data problems taken up. His book shows the trappings of an academic thesis with extensive references and notes, but it differs from most theses in that-, it is eminently readable. So too is Charlton's study, though it suffers from inadequate documentation in that, although some quotes are identifiable from the bibliography and from textual references, others are untraceable: certainly fuller referencing might enable users to avoid attributing a comment by Inglis on cycling to Dunstan on athletics. O'Hara's bibliography is limited to books, despite the fact that articles are often more useful and more up-to-date. Charlton's bibliography is less extensive - it does not include any of O'Hara's publications - but it is annotated. As an academic, O'Hara is far more willing than the more respectful Charlton to criticise fellow scholars; in particular he takes issue with Connell & Irving's interpretation of political change in nineteenth century Australia. Charlton, on the other hand, though willing to criticise contemporary accounts, accepts too readily the views of modern historians and the historical faction of Manning Clark. He is far more at home with the political controversies and gambling scandals of post-war Australia in which his journalistic talents are utilised effectively, though occasionally he puts in descriptive material because it is interesting rather than relevant.

Both books begin with the exportation of British gambling traditions to Australia and both authors accept that gambling was widespread in Georgian Britain and that, whereas gambling by the lower classes could serve economic as well as social functions, wagering by the wealthier classes was very much conspicuous consumption in which losing large stakes, perhaps even more than winning them, demonstrated one's status. O'Hara, however, presents more detail on the British scene and is more perceptive about the role of the gentry.

Britain's economic climate was transformed more rapidly than Australia's into an urban industrial environment, one which demanded

major changes in the lifestyles of the working classes. O'Hara argues that the lag in industrialisation in Australia weakened the challenge of the anti-gambling brigade relative to Britain. However, it may be that he has misrepresented the degree of success attained by the British reformers. This reviewer's research is suggesting that the traditional unholy trinity of sex, alcohol and gambling remained major leisure activities before, during, and beyond the Industrial Revolution: the form changed but not the substance.

Later imported ideas are discussed in less detail. Charlton stereotypes the Chinese on the goldfields as 'dedicated gamblers' and there is reference to the introduction of the French totalisator to Australian racing, but introduction of the conflicting role in the later development of Australian gambling played by nationalism, British cultural imperialism, European mass immigration, and the American economic invasion remains a relatively neglected theme in both works.

Both writers are more than mere chroniclers of gambling history and neither treat gambling in isolation from wider events, though Charlton tends to present the social and economic background as an introductory setting whereas O'Hara makes continual reference to the prevailing situation as an essential part of his historical analysis. He is more successful than Charlton in plotting social and economic change and relating these to changes in Australian leisure activities of which gambling is but one facet.

The diversity of the Australian gambling experience at state level is emphasised by both authors, though neither deal extensively with Western Australia. Despite Federation there has been no nationwide regulations pertaining to gambling and each state has been free to pass its own legislation. Hence the disparity in the chronology of the state's legalisation of the totalisator, the T.A.B., casinos and poker machines. O'Hara is particularly good on the relationship between government and gambling, assessing the relative role of three influences on policy: the need to bring legislation into line with the attitudes and practices of the Australian people, the revenue potential of gaming and betting; and the need to liberalise in order to exercise government control rather than that of organised crime.

Recent research has undermined some of the cherished assumptions about Australian sport. We no longer accept that sport is classless or that everyone is treated equally in the sporting arena. But what of the adage that Australia has long been a nation of gamblers? Historically wagering seems to have been part and parcel of most early Australian sporting activity. Horse-racing, of course, was a major betting outlet but many other events also involved wagers. Throughout the mid nineteenth century press advertisements regularly contained challenges for money matches in horse-racing, trotting, quoits, skittles, single-wicket cricket, pigeon and penny-piece shooting, as well as pedestrian feats against the clock. Some of these were highly publicised, large-stake, head-to-head events which suggests a degree of conspicuous consumption in a society with high incomes and relatively few consumer goods or investment opportunities. Others were low-fee sweepstakes catering for the less well-off sportsman wishing to back his prowess against all-comers, Both involved spectators making side bets in support of their own champions or judgement. By the turn of the century advertised sporting challenges for money had declined, Those who wished to back their sporting abilities now did so via entry fees to athletic, rowing or other organised contests; matches in horse-racing had given way to sweepstake events with added prizemoney; and cricket and several other sports had become team events in organised leagues, Gambling on sport had become institutionalised itself with the establishment of the racecourse totalisator, a government-approved betting outlet but, of more significance, illegal betting, particularly that involved with horse-racing, had also become institutionalised with well-organised gambling networks. This is documented in both books along with a selection of gambling activities unassociated with sport including land speculation, state lotteries, casinos, poker machines and, of course, two up.

The sheer volume of material presented by both authors serves to underline the traditional view of Australia's gambling proclivities. Nevertheless the data is essentially non quantitative in nature and we are still left with the issue being one of faith rather than fact, though between them the authors do suggest reasons why Australians might gamble as much as has been implied. For the early period of European settlement they include, in addition to the Georgian heritage, the excess of males, the lack of other

spending outlets and the absence of organised entertainment. This was reinforced by the role of risk and speculation in the Australian economic experience as exemplified in the gold rushes, droughts, bushfires and stock market booms and slumps. Moreover, gambling has fitted other preconceptions of Australian life: gambling is democratic in that everyone is equal in front of the poker machine and that chance rather than hereditary decides who wins and who loses.

The National Association for Gambling Studies was formed to promote research into all aspects of gambling and to disseminate the results of that research to those in the gambling industry and to the public in general. So far these objectives have been pursued primarily by the organisation of conferences and the publication of their proceedings.

Faces of Gambling has divided thirty four papers into six sections of interest to different groups of social scientists. It begins with the topical issue of The Development of Casinos in Australia; moves on to The History of Gambling; then to the nitty-gritty of the mechanics of gambling in The Economics and Mathematics of Gambling and the Racing Game in which professional punters show that betting is a mug's game. The final sections deal with The Psychology of Gambling and Problem Gambling. The diversity of interests being catered to render the compilation somewhat eclectic. This perhaps is inevitable but not so the decision to print some of the papers unedited; the twenty jargon-loaded pages by Garry Trompf on 'Gambling and Religion' stand in sharp contrast to the virtual non-paper 'On Selecting Winners' by Barry Hughes.

Those papers which will attract the eye of the sports historian include an excellent study by Griffith University's Jan McMillen 'When the Chips are Down: A Comparison of Australian Casino Developments' whose analysis puts to shame the descriptive piece by William Eadington, the visiting American expert. John O'Hara delves into the history of 'Gambling on the Australian Goldfields' mainly to show that contemporary observers are not necessarily reliable source material. Jim Watts' 'History of the Totalisator' is antiquarian history of the worst kind, listing facts with no analysis whatsoever and, worse still, not even providing a decent narrative as compensation. Don Vogelaar's piece on 'Teletrack' reads better but is lightweight. It can also be suggested that racing form is

really sports history and the more impecunious of our practitioners might find salvation in Clive Allcock's 'Analysis of a Successful Racing System' but be warned it involves serious study, a willingness to avoid hunches and that hot tip direct from the third cousin of the stablehand, and, as its originator acknowledges, 'it may have some losing years'.

If publishing was a horse-race the judge's decision on these books would be a relatively easy task. Although handicapped by poor quality paper and even worse illustrations, O'Hara's work comes in well ahead because of the depth of its analysis. Charlton's lesser weighty volume, however, gives its readers a run for their money, but the NAGS papers trail in a poor third, perhaps because of the frequent change in jockey.