

Book Reviews

Patched: the History of Gangs in New Zealand

JARROD GILBERT

Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2013
332p. | ISBN 978 1 86940 729 2 | \$49.99

Wanted, A Beautiful Barmaid:

Women Behind the Bar in New Zealand, 1830–1976

SUSAN UPTON

Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2013
239p. | ISBN 978 0 86473 894 3 | \$50

Jarrold Gilbert prefaces *Patched*, his history of gangs in New Zealand, with the frank admission that during ten years of ethnographic research he was beaten up, ‘involved’ in a brawl, and accosted at knifepoint. Rarely does a historian get so close to their work. Despite this alarming introduction, the result is a measured account that seeks to balance forty years of sensationalist reporting and populist politics depicting gangs as ‘inherently criminal and illegitimate’ and, reflecting his background as a sociologist, to ‘assist better-targeted public policies’ [viii, 237].

Patched opens with ‘milk bar cowboys’ – motorcycle-riding teenage rock n’ roll aficionados – congregating outside Auckland’s Majestic Theatre in the 1950s. Framed around four ‘pivot points’, Gilbert delineates the evolution of New Zealand’s gang scene through to the emergence of ‘LA-style’ street gangs in the 2000s, influenced by another strand of American popular culture – gangsta rap. The initial transformation came with the establishment of a Hells Angels chapter in Auckland, the first outside California, in 1961. Within a decade, motorcycle club culture – patched jackets, distinct emblems, and formalised organisational hierarchy – became pervasive among the country’s nascent street gangs, the most enduring of which are Black Power and the Mongrel Mob. Alongside the predominantly Pakeha bikies, street gangs proliferated in ‘multiply marginalised’ Maori and Pasifika communities in the 1970s, intensifying territorial conflict [45]. As internecine violence spilled into the public arena, police and politicians alike fuelled a moral panic, passing and implementing targeted anti-gang legislation. Confrontational police tactics, Gilbert believes, culminated with the infamous 1979 Moerewa riot, where rampaging gang members first attacked officers. Initially, the

incident hardened public attitudes, but ultimately induced a retreat from hard-line policing with the realisation that gangs constituted a complex 'social problem requiring social redress' [109].

The delicate 'gang-community balance' looms large in Gilbert's history [166]. Gangs are warily tolerated when they confine anti-social behaviour within the underworld. If gang violence endangers 'civilian' safety, authorities quickly resort to extreme measures. Thus, the Muldoonist employment of gangs as publicly funded community labour did not last long, swept away by the neo-liberal broom and a wave of outrage provoked by a highly publicised rape trial in 1985. Heightened state hostility and members' diminished job prospects in a depressed economy stimulated gang maturation. Whereas rebellious youths had floated between work and patched life in the prosperous 1970s, gangs became the preserve of older men in the 1980s and 1990s. Without work, elements within street gangs and motorcycle clubs turned to profit-driven crime, primarily in the drug trade, yet Gilbert stresses such activities are typically perpetrated by individuals and seldom orchestrated by entire organisations.

In the years since 1976, when Robert Muldoon socialised at a Black Power pad, gangs have become an evermore toxic political issue. Unbalanced reportage and political demagoguery have produced, in Gilbert's estimation, a counterproductive bi-partisan consensus on the need to suppress gangs, and a consequent reinforcement in the legal arsenal against organised crime. Yet, as he concludes, the methamphetamine 'epidemic' of the 2000s and patched gangs' waning cultural congruence among contemporary teenagers may undermine gangs more effectively than poorly targeted punitive legislation.

Unlike a conventional organisational history, Gilbert has little in the way of archived minutes, published reports, or financial records to guide his study. Instead, his arguments are buttressed by fifty years of government-funded reports on the 'gang problem', newspaper coverage, and crucially, fifty-two formal interviews (and countless informal exchanges) conducted with gang members, social workers, lawyers, and police. 'Embedded' in the gang scene for a decade, Gilbert fluently explicates overseas theory on group formation and identity with vivid and deeply researched examples from across the country. *Patched* is accompanied by a judicious selection of photographs from newspaper archives and members' personal collections, which complement the rich reminiscences proffered by current and former gang members stretching back to the 1950s.

Gilbert's reticence about his immersion in gang life and the implications for his research may trouble some readers. Despite the precautions he took to protect his sources – including the destruction of interview transcripts – it is unclear whether participants in recent feuds or criminal activity fully recounted their history to an outside observer. Alive to the conundrum, Gilbert usefully 'triangulates' colourful anecdotes with empirical data, showing, for instance, that gang affiliates constitute a tiny portion of drug-related arrests [x]. The book is at its weakest on gangs and family life, and toward the end, when he describes the challenge posed to patched gangs by 'incipient' LA-style street gangs formed in South Auckland over the past decade. Having conducted few interviews with women, or members of these new groups, Gilbert's writing lacks insights comparable to those offered on motorcycle clubs or street gangs, which are now fifty-year-old institutions. These concerns are minor, and do not detract from an important and engaging contribution to New Zealand's small indigenous literature on gangs, which has wider appeal as a late twentieth-century history of domestic and international migration, policing, social policy, and political discourse.

Presumably researched in more congenial circumstances, Susan Upton's *Wanted, a Beautiful Barmaid*, uses similar techniques to recover the history of another marginalised social group. Beginning with the Maori wives who worked alongside Pakeha traders and publicans in the 1830s, Upton details the lively history of New Zealand women in the liquor trade until 1976, when parliament expunged the last gender-specific provisions concerning the barroom from the statute book. Loose and intermittently enforced, early licensing regulations allowed a small group of women – usually publicans' widows – to own and operate pubs. Alongside alcohol and the consequent spectre of drunkenness, the settlers carried another form of cultural baggage to New Zealand in the 1830s – temperance. Over the following 150 years, the two forces existed in dialectic opposition, a conflict frequently played out over the bitterly contested figure of the barmaid.

From the debauched Bay of Islands grog shops, Upton shifts her focus to the South Island goldfields, where barmaids were first employed in the 1860s. In the male dominated gold towns, barmaids 'were treated as a spectacle' to entice patrons in a competitive market [52]. The work was arduous and dangerous, yet many women found it preferable to the loneliness, drudgery, and poor remuneration that awaited those who entered domestic service. As frontier towns grew, and an influx of single

female migrants corrected the colony's gender imbalance, tolerance for drunkenness and 'immoral' behaviour diminished amid a new clamour for public decorum. Changing attitudes to alcohol, driven by increasingly powerful prohibitionist forces, foreshadowed the development of a comprehensive colony-wide liquor licensing architecture over the next forty years.

Though prohibitionists had challenged women's place in the bar since the 1860s, it only became a 'national' political issue as a result of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union's (WCTU) late-century anti-barmaid campaign. As befitted an American cultural export, the New Zealand WCTU's concern with the barmaid mirrored similar campaigns across the English-speaking world. Yet, while Upton situates her research within an international historiography, particularly as a companion to Diane Kirkby's work on Australian barmaids, she rarely delves into the intricate layers of cross-border exchange, both personal and by print, that bound New Zealand prohibitionists of all stripes into a self-consciously transnational temperance campaign.¹ At home, demands for the abolition of the 'barmaid system' formed part of an expansive temperance agenda that reached a crescendo in the 1900s, forcing the closure of hundreds of pubs through local option polls and their control of district licensing committees. Alarmed by the threat to their livelihood, the federated brewers sacrificed barmaids, hoping to avoid being swept away by 'the rising tide of prohibition'.² With their assent, parliament amended the Licensing Act in 1910 to proscribe employment of any new barmaids and gradually transform the pub into an exclusively male domain.

However, as Upton clearly shows, restrictions were never absolute. The law exempted licensees' female relatives and the shrinking pool of barmaids who had registered with the Department of Labour by 1912. Though previous amendments reduced the number of female hoteliers, wartime labour shortages in the 1910s and the 1940s reversed the slide. Changes in New Zealanders' drinking habits, precipitated by the introduction of six-o'clock closing in 1917, and 'mixed' or 'civilised' drinking after World War Two challenged the creaking register system, which proved increasingly burdensome for short-staffed hotels. Trade unions, however, vigorously defended abolition as a means of safeguarding the male breadwinner wage. As Upton elicits from the Hotel Association of New Zealand's records, even after legal restrictions ended in 1961, a 'gentlemen's agreement' between management and labour restricted women's employment opportunities until the 1970s. In a testament to the power of the temperance movement, echoes of the anti-barmaid

campaign reverberated over fifty years later. In particular, the image of the barmaid as a corrupted siren – morally compromised by barroom vice, and a dangerous temptation for younger male drinkers – that pervaded the nineteenth-century press recurred in the labour negotiations of the 1960s.

An archivist by training, Upton's long career at the Alexander Turnbull Library shines through in the book's many enlightening illustrations, including scores of cartoons, documents, and photographs from repositories across the country. However, mirroring Jarrod Gilbert's admission that his fieldwork often entailed 'partying for days at a time' (a modern incarnation of the goldfields 'spree') [x], she glibly remarks that attending 'a party was often more productive than a day at National Archives' [17]. Although anecdotes from interviewees who began bar work in the 1960s enliven *Wanted, a Beautiful Barmaid*, the book's early chapters offer little personal information about their nineteenth-century predecessors. Stories of female publicans, like Rebecca Bond who attempted to frame an influential Invercargill teetotaler as a sly-grogger in 1896, feature more prominently, but the text contains few personal traces of the colonial barmaid. The absence of these earlier voices, however, does not speak to Upton's failings as a historian. Rather it testifies to the immense challenges that confront scholars attempting to recover women's stories – particularly those of Maori and working-class women – and reinscribe them into an overwhelmingly masculine historical canon. In this endeavour, Upton's book is a success, providing a welcome corrective to a national historiography enthralled by prohibitionists and a challenge to the hoary trope of the pub as 'an unrelenting bastion of frontier male culture.'³

James Keating
University of New South Wales

Endnotes

1. Diane Kirkby, *Barmaids: A History of Women's Work in Pubs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). See, for example, Edmund Rogers, 'Better than an Ironclad: Leonard Isitt, Temperance and Greater Britain', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 4 (2012): 579–600.
2. 'Report of the Royal Commission to Inquire into and Report upon the Sale of Liquor in New Zealand', Appendices to the *Journals of the House of Representatives*, 1975, H-5, 21.
3. Greg Ryan, 'Drink and the Historians: Sober Reflections on Alcohol in New Zealand 1840–1914', *New Zealand Journal of History* 44, no. 1 (2010): 47.