

# *Steeped in History: Afternoon Tea at Vacluse House*

Melissa Dive

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney*

Immersed in notions of modernity and tradition, this dissertation will offer an insight into the transformations and tensions that arose as Australia evolved into a modern nation. By using the Vacluse House Tearooms as a springboard, it will present an argument surrounding the interactions between the two concepts through the unique lens of afternoon tea. In doing so, the author contends that despite tensions between modern and traditional ideals, both concepts co-exist, shattering the notion that contemporary societies 'weaken' tradition (Gross 1992). Furthermore, this paper draws upon the work of Dugalic (2011) in suggesting that although the nature of afternoon tea is inherently traditional, it could be seen that Vacluse House Tearooms have transformed this concept over time in order to create better relevance in contemporary society. This has led to the site's core enterprises incorporating modern functions and a variety of foreign tea. Ultimately, it will argue that an understanding of contemporary society enables Vacluse House Tearooms to embrace and harness modernity, which in fact, *preserves* and *reinvigorates* traditions. This will seek to demonstrate how contemporary society is structured and progressed through the fusion of both tradition and modern frameworks (Dugalic, p. 1) and promote a deeper meaning to the Tearoom's complex, and enriched history.

**Keywords:** tearooms; modernity; tradition;

## **Introduction**

Individually and nationally we are deeply indebted to the tea-plant  
(Sigmond 1839, p.1)

It could be argued that afternoon tea has largely been overlooked throughout the history of Australia. It sits discreetly on the borders of the nation's historical narrative, yet its own story corresponds with significant changes in Australia's development (Khamis 2006, p. 77). It may be largely unnoticed now, being so embedded in our modern lives, yet its rich history is elucidated by the fact that it has maintained a perpetual, yet evolving presence in society.

Established in the 1930's, the Vacluse House Tearooms overlook the grounds of the estate. Historically, the site has served traditional afternoon tea, with the recent addition of contemporary tea varieties, Devonshire and High tea. It is also presently one of Sydney's foremost event venues, providing a location for weddings, celebrations and corporate meetings. This gives rise to a plethora of ideas, from its traditional roots as serving British afternoon tea among family and friends, to a focus on modernity, evolving into a commercial business with tea as a modern commodity. The main focus of this site, therefore, is on the way in which it provides an elegant and historic setting for afternoon

tea, whilst harnessing modern services to effectively *reinvigorate* tradition. It derives much of its significance then, from the idea that it embodies, at its core, a juxtaposition between tradition and modernity, exemplifying the idea that both concepts can indeed, co-exist.

### **Afternoon tea as a culturally and socially significant tradition**

“What was first regarded as a luxury, has now become, if not an absolute necessity, at least one of our daily wants, the loss of which would cause more suffering and excite more regret than would the deprivation of many things which were once counted as necessities of life” (Day 1878, p. 1)

The context surrounding Australia’s colonisation can be seen as an extremely meaningful foundation on which its culture was built. As British tradition permeated everyday life, the multitude of customs and practices readily adopted by the colony reinforced its imperial relationship. The significance of tearooms, therefore, is demonstrated through the perception of “traditional” afternoon tea as a vehicle for imbuing British tradition into Australian society. Subsequently, afternoon tea became intimately woven into Australian life as a culturally and socially significant tradition (Knight 2011, p. 71).

According to Gross (1992, p. 8), the term tradition refers to an array of practices, beliefs or specific ways of thinking which are inherited from the past and endure in contemporary life. In his perspective, tradition operates as “social cement,” (Gross 1992, p. 21) establishing values, creating connections and collating behaviour. In 1893, Sigmond furthers this definition through the lens of afternoon tea, suggesting that it not only brought partakers together, but also enabled one to “temporarily merge individual and national identities” (cited in Fromer 2008, p. 30).

Australia’s widespread consumption of tea offered a testament to the British Empire’s immense success, imperial power and influence over colonial Australia. Newling (2011, p. 19) attributes this widespread consumption to the idea that tea had transformed from a luxury item to a necessity within Australian society. Indeed, writing at the time of 1883, Richard Twopenny alleges that: “tea may fairly claim to be the national beverage” (1973, p. 64). Blainey (2003, p. 357) furthers this idea, proposing that Australians came to be the most fanatical consumers of tea in the world. However, this infatuation did not exist in isolation. It was a product of direct settlement and identification with British tradition and ideology. Together with flour and sugar, tea became a “tool of imperial expansion...on which our nation was built” (Symons 1982, pp. 18-19). Susan Khamis attributes the significance of this to the idea that the British tea trade “effectively orchestrated its widespread accessibility and affordability” (2006, p. 3). As a result, consumption of tea became “regularised and ritualised” (Khamis 2006, p. 3). Indeed, according to Walker and Roberts, tea was ascertained as a food staple in the colony by the early nineteenth century (cited in Khamis 2006, p. 8). Moreover, this popularity of tea is further related to Newling’s idea that for the early colonists, who were taken to a foreign and unknown country, tea delivered a necessary “comfort” (Newling 2011, p. 19). As most were accustomed to tea, it was their fondness of the ritualised beverage that encouraged its embrace by forthcoming

colonists or settlers (Khamis 2006, p. 3). Through this, it can be seen that even the most simple commodity had the ability to connect the individual with the nation (Guerty 2004, p. 59) and by doing so, ingrain tradition and culture.

However, afternoon tea not only reinforced ties to Australia's British heritage, but also held a unique social significance in society. For example, Khamis (2006, p. 62) attributes the appeal of afternoon tea in the colony to the socialisation it fostered. The development of codes of behaviour surrounding demeanor, clothing and propriety saw the rise of afternoon tea as a social and fashionable tradition (Khamis 2006, p. 62). This is furthered in Theodosia Wallace's etiquette novel, which claimed: "It is Australians who have glorified afternoon tea" (1913, p. 5). This exemplifies the passionate extent to which the afternoon tea experience was embraced and embedded in the social calendar. Moreover, from 1884, the Sydney School of Arts offered practical cooking lessons, focusing on the selection and preparation of food for afternoon tea (cited in Knight 2011, p. 30). The significance of this is in the idea that the very existence of these lessons implies the social necessity of afternoon tea. These classes also exemplify the importance of the tradition's rituals and customs to be performed correctly and correspond with social demands. Furthermore, afternoon tea provided women with the ability to talk freely. The intimacy of the teacup came to symbolize women's conversations with each other as confidential. It was the nature of this conversation which was significant for relationship building and friendship strengthening (Knight 2011, p. 45). Thus, it can be seen that afternoon tea became embedded in Australian everyday life as an extremely significant social and cultural event in colonial society.

### **Changing concepts of afternoon tea & tearooms as representative of modernity**

As Australia evolved from colony to nation, the significance of tea in modern society transformed accordingly. Although its popularity did not change, the means by which Australians experienced and understood tea evolved within a greater cultural and social history (Khamis 2006, p. 77).

Berman (1983) proposes that it was the development of industrialisation, urbanisation and mechanisation which were key in driving modernity, as well as the factory, the city and the nation (cited in Morley 1996, p. 56). The "belief in the necessity of social progress" (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p. 33) propelled these social revolutions, reinforcing the move towards "a more efficient orderly society that would bring greater prosperity" (Gascoigne 2002, p. 5). This gave rise to the eighteenth century Industrial Revolution, and thus, modernity.

Tearooms responded to these ideals of industrialisation and the metropolis, harnessing modernity in order to preserve the tradition of afternoon tea. Gross (1992, p.28) however, argues that the introduction of modernity (and specifically early capitalism) was key in deteriorating and weakening the hold of tradition in everyday life. He attributes this to the keynotes of Enlightenment thinking, such as progress, and in particular, the Industrial Revolution: "industrialism induced people to let go of tradition in the interest of new constructions" (Gross 1992, p. 37). However, through the lens of afternoon tea, it could be seen that modernity reinvigorated and, in fact, preserved tradition. Arguably, by harnessing the use of modernity, this was the way in which the tradition of afternoon tea resonated in

contemporary society. For example, the modern concept of tea as a lucrative commodity transformed tearooms into flourishing enterprises in a burgeoning metropolis. As commercial businesses, tearooms adapted to, and capitalised on, modernity and cosmopolitanism. The shift from private afternoon tea in one's home and into the public area, quickly became a fashionable encounter, as a multitude of businesses capitalized on the appeal of this experience. Thus, "the tearoom in Australia had become an identifiable symbol of modernity, as it embraced technological advancements and new ideas in decor, becoming an appealing and attractive place to be seen"(Knight 2011, p. 54). As a result, in 1903 the Brisbane Courier claimed that: "tearooms abound on every side [of the city] it is difficult to say where they are not" (cited in Knight 2011, p. 53). A further example of this was epitomised in The Sydney Morning Herald, which reported in 1910 that a rooftop tearoom was established on the highest building in the city of Hobart. As a result, afternoon tea was carried out under the open sky (cited in Knight 2011, p. 55). The attractiveness of this tearoom lay not only in its modern location, but in its panoramic views over the city. This was significant as "they were able to offer patrons an innovative experience that quite literally immersed them in the thriving metropolis, offering a high degree of exhibitionism" (Knight 2011, p. 55).

Furthermore, an article that appeared in The Register in 1908, encapsulated the modernity of tearooms by including a piece surrounding Miers, a tearoom which had become extremely fashionable in South Australia. Of its modern features, perhaps the most significant was that the first floor alone possessed the capacity of three hundred and fifty people. Furthermore, the tearoom had a "boiling water urn, automatically heated and supplied with fresh water and goods were displayed on a glittering array of electroplate stands" (cited in Knight 2011, p. 56). Thus it can be seen that having afternoon tea at Miers was a uniquely modern experience. It harnessed the use of industrial ideals through innovative technological facilities, epitomising modernity and thus, enhancing the appeal of an age-old tradition in a modern context. These features, along with its extensive capacity to seat numerous people and modern rooftop setting, ultimately popularized tearooms as chic places to frequent and enjoy leisure time in a modern context.

Thus, it can be seen that the modern invigoration of afternoon tea was key to its survival and popularity in contemporary society. The aforementioned tearooms reveal the complex link between tradition and modernity in contemporary society, and the way that ideas within these two theoretical frameworks inform both the past and present moment. Whilst tradition functions as the basis of society, offering historical values, modernity reinvigorates and transforms traditions so as to make them pertinent to the contemporary moment (Duglic 2011, p. 2).

### **Tradition and modernity as co-existing entities**

The relationship between tradition and modernity is highly contested within the literature, and demonstrated through the Vacluse House Tearoom's atmosphere, setting and services offered. As argued, it could be seen that modern society offers an opportunity to revitalise and in doing so, *preserve* tradition. Acknowledging the present society as permeated by commercialism, multiculturalism and urbanisation enables the Vacluse House Tearooms to effectively harness these ideals and sustain afternoon tea's continual presence.

It is Gusfield's (1967) principle ideals which serve as a foundation for this paper's argument. He postulates that, "tradition and modernity are frequently mutually reinforcing, rather than systems in conflict" (1967, p. 356). He furthers this by suggesting "that the capacity of old and new cultures and structures to exist without conflict and even with mutual adaptations is a frequent phenomenon on social change; the old is not necessarily replaced by the new" (Gusfield, p. 354). Among others who share parallel views on the tradition-modernity dichotomy are Lloyd and Susan Rudolph. The Rudolphs declare: "the assumption that modernity and tradition are radically contradictory rests on a misdiagnosis of tradition as it is found in traditional societies, a misunderstanding of modernity as it is found in modern societies, and a misapprehension of the relationship between them" (1967, p. 1). Indeed, "it is incorrect to view traditional societies as static, normatively consistent or structurally homogenous" (Gusfield 1967, p. 351). Instead, Shils (2006) suggests that traditions are exposed to variations, enabling them to be understood as "the living repetition that manages to suggest a fresh truth" (Crowe, Economakis, Lykoudi & Gage 1999, p. 7). Similarly, as the survival of traditions are dependent on their context (Engler & Grieve 2005, p. 4), they must parallel the conditions in which they operate, evolving through cultural changes that perpetually transform their structures. This is to resonate and continue through history. In order to do this, they must uncover relevance both in their previous existence and current moment (Dugalic 2011). Thus, the perpetual presence of traditional afternoon tea in contemporary society is related to its adaptation to "fit personal, historical and cultural circumstances" (Engler & Grieve 2005, p.142). It is through this evolving disposition of tradition, that afternoon at Vacluse House can be more deeply understood.

Through the Vacluse House Tearooms, it can be seen that traditional and modernity are not contradictory, nor mutually exclusive. Contrary to the tearooms of the twentieth century, Vacluse House Tearooms present a traditional setting with contemporary functions. The style of the site suggests a hybridity of tradition and modernity, with French doors, stained glass windows, bentwood chairs and Worcester china. Through this, it embraces the history and style of Vacluse House. From social gatherings with girlfriends and generational get-togethers, to celebrations and birthdays, women of all ages have demonstrated the popularity of this modern revival of a socially and culturally significant tradition. Similarly, through social events such as weddings and other significant gatherings for High Tea, the traditional significance of afternoon tea as "social glue" (Gross 1992, p.21) is perpetuated. Although true to its traditional roots, afternoon tea is reinvigorated through the addition of various contemporary varieties of tea, including Chai and green tea, reflecting the widespread notion of Australia as multicultural. This is also demonstrated by the site's wide range of coffee and other modern beverages available. Thus, while its primary operations are still grounded in tradition, the Tearooms' other services create an image of a bustling, commercial restaurant and function venue. This is therefore a testament to the transformation of tradition to align with modern values, as modernity locates tradition in the present and connects the past to a contemporary reality (Dugalic 2011). This adds relevance and vivacity to evolving traditions. Thus, the Vacluse House Tearooms exemplify the merging of tradition and modernity as two interlinked entities, co-existing in the edifice of a present. It is only through this integrated concept of tradition and modernity that we are deeply able to appreciate and understand the Tearooms and the way in which society is developed and re- shaped.

A direct result of this is seen through afternoon tea as an extremely popular leisure activity in contemporary society, in fact mirroring the socially significant history of the tradition. Some argue that the present is afternoon tea's heyday. For example, the Sydney Morning Herald reports that, "young ladies anywhere from eighteen to thirty (have) been to these amazing chocolate cafes and been out to bars but are suddenly rediscovering this fun, grand and delightful experience" (McInerney 2011). The article further suggests that younger people have responded extremely well to the reinvigoration of afternoon tea, enjoying black, green and herbal varieties. However, the customs and rituals surrounding historic afternoon tea, such as traditional teapots and china, resonate as a constant presence and trend amongst youth. Furthermore, the idea that modern settings can evolve and re-energise tradition is again reflected by the idea that "most guests dress with a sense of occasion, particularly the women, who make up the bulk of the clientele" (McInerney 2011). This suggests that the tearooms' ability to embrace and harness modernity has led to the popularity of such a long-standing and significant tradition. Thus, it is argued that tradition and modernity co-exist, interact and enhance each other beneficially.

## **Conclusion**

Although afternoon tea is grounded in tradition, preserving aspects of British culture in Australia, the addition of contemporary aspects within the Vacluse House Tearooms are seen as integrating the evolving disposition of tradition with modernity. Whilst revealing tensions in modern society as Australia progressed from colony to nation, this paper brings a greater understanding of the site as *reinvigorating* tradition. The success and popularity of afternoon tea in contemporary society therefore demonstrates that it has not "weakened tradition" (Gross 1992, p. 28) but rather, performs the opposite. Through this, it can be seen that tradition and modernity engage with each other beneficially. Thus, from a broader perspective, rather than being static, traditions are exposed to continual change, with modern establishments continuously re- invigorating their functions in order to pursue relevance in the present via modern ideals (Dugalic 2001, p. 1). Consequently, contrary to previous thought, contemporary society does not reflect the substitution of tradition with modernity, but is rather a constant re- invigoration of tradition through a unified relationship with modernity.

## **Notes on Contributor**

Melissa Dive is a first year student studying public communication at the University of Technology Sydney.

## **References**

- Blainey, G. 2004, *Black Kettle and Full Moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia*, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Victoria.
- Crowe, N., Economakis, R., Lykoudis, M. & Gage, M. 1999, *Building Cities: Towards a Civil Society and Sustainable Environment*, Artmedia Press, London
- Day, S. 1878, *Tea: Its Mystery and History*, Kessinger Publishing, Montana.

- Dugalic, J. 2011, 'Queen Victoria Was For Unity: The Union of Tradition and Modernity in the Queen Victoria Building,' *Ideas in History*, vol. 3, no. 2, viewed at 10 Oct 2012, <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/studentjournals/index.php/iih/article/view/1350/1394>
- Engler, S. & Grieve, G.P. 2005, *Historicizing "Tradition" in the Study of Religion*, Walter deGruyter, Berlin.
- Fromer, J. 2008, *A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England*, Swallow Press, Ohio.
- Fromer, J. 2008, 'Deeply Indebted to the Tea-Plant: Representations of English National Identity in Victorian Histories of Tea', *Journal of Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 36, no.2, pp. 531-547.
- Ghosh, D & Gillen, P. 2007, *Colonialism and Modernity*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.
- Gross, D. 1992, *The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity*, University of Massachusetts Press, Massachusetts.
- Guerty, P & Switaj, K. 2004, 'Tea Porcelain, and Sugar in the British Atlantic World', *Journal of Magazine of History*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 56-59.
- Gusfield, J. 1967, 'Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 72, no. 4, pp. 351- 362.
- Khamis, S. 2006, 'A taste for Tea: How Tea Travelled to (and through) Australian Culture', *Journal of Australian Cultural History*, vol. 24, pp. 57-80.
- Knight, J. 2011, '*A Poisonous Cup? Afternoon Tea in Australian Society, 1870- 1914*', PhD thesis, University of Sydney, viewed 3 October 2012, [http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/7983/1/Knight\\_J\\_A%20Poisonou up.pdf](http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/7983/1/Knight_J_A%20Poisonou up.pdf).
- McInerney, S. 2011, 'Afternoon Tea hits a high note', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 6 2011, viewed 3 October 2012, <<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/about-town/afternoon-tea-hits-a-high-note-20110704-1gxwx.html>>.
- Morley, D. 1996, 'Postmodernism: The Rough Guide' in J.Curran, D, Morley,& V. Walkerdine, eds, *Cultural Studies and Communications*, St Martin's Press, New York, pp. 50-65.
- Newling, J. 2011, 'A Universal Comfort Tea in the Sydney penal settlement', *The Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies*, vol. 1, pp. 19- 38, viewed 4 October 2012, <<http://www.localejournal.org/issues/n1/Locale%20n1%20-%2006%20-%20Newling.pdf>>.
- Sigmond, G. 1839, *Tea; Its Effects, Medicinal and Moral*, Longman, London.
- Symons, M. 1982, *One Continuous Picnic: A History of Eating in Australia*, Duck Press, Adelaide.
- Twopenny, R. 1976, *Town Life in Australia*, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Victoria.