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'Monsters', the battle with the Demon Drink – Bessie Harrison Lee

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In nineteenth century Australia, there were various interpretations of the causes of alcoholism and approaches to treating medically diagnosed drunkenness. These ideas were disseminated through different platforms, including pamphlets, public lectures, and medical journals, and were aimed at a range of audiences. Bessie Harrison Lee, a prominent public speaker and leader of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, used a variety of mediums to highlight the dangers of alcohol to both individuals and society. This paper argues that Lee's campaign combined multiple strategies, using powerful terms like 'demon' and 'slave owner' to denounce the alcohol industry. While her stance appeared conservative, Bessie was actually ahead of her time in promoting contemporary medical views on treating alcohol addiction. The ideas were a promulgation of preventing the drink industry from establishing themselves in both rural and urban areas, overseeing the signing of the pledge and helping alcoholics refrain recover through community support and Christian forgiveness.

Introduction

During the nineteenth century in Australia, there existed nuanced interpretations of the cause of alcoholism and the solutions to cure medically diagnosed drunkenness. These ideas were circulated in a variety of medical and non-medical platforms through publications in pamphlets, public lectures, and medical papers, and addressed to diverse audiences in Australia, New Zealand, America, and Britain. Bessie Harrison Lee (1860-1950), public orator and leader of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, published and spoke on many different platforms on the dangers of alcohol to both individuals and society. In this paper, I argue that multiple avenues of attack were integrated into Lee's crusade using terminology such as 'demon' or 'slave owner' to condemn the drink industry, not the 'drunkard'. Although presenting as conservative, Lee was at the forefront of contemporary medical recommendations in addressing alcohol addiction. Lee's ideas in her writing and oratory drew from contemporary debates flourishing overseas and were therefore an amalgamation of actions to prevent the drink industry from establishing itself in both rural and urban areas, overseeing the signing of the pledge, and helping alcoholics recover through community support and WCTU tutelage.

There was a long black box, ornamented with silver on the lid. There were women weeping in the room and mother was weeping too. And then someone lifted me up and in the long black box I saw a woman with a cruel mark on her face and a tiny baby on her arm.²

The viewing of a mother and baby lying dead in a coffin, killed by a violent alcoholic

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² Bessie Harrison Lee Cowie, *One of Australia's Daughters: An Autobiography of Mrs Harrison Lee Cowie* (Los Angeles: R. Bowen, 1902), 5.

outburst from the father of the child, left a searing impression on Bessie Harrison Lee's memory. This extract from Lee's 1902 autobiography documents her attending the funeral of a young mother and child, both killed because of what we would now define as domestic violence. The image cemented Lee's hatred of drink and its effect on families, where Lee recalled:³

Not only was this image of a young family's life cut short imprinted onto my conscience, but what was equally significant was my own mother's soft murmurings. She whispered to me, 'It was the drink that did it.'⁴

Lee's mother's comforting of the mourners and constant reference to 'the drink' spoke of loving kindness as opposed to blame. In the spirit of her mother's soft murmurings, Lee further developed a language of 'the other', 'the demon drink', and 'the serpent', to separate the alcoholic, the human, from the addiction. Lee utilised the language of Evangelical Christianity and modern medical trends to liberate the person and condemn those that profited from a person's weakness, the publican owners, and producers of alcohol. Her ability to take the language developed by the American, Canadian, New Zealand and British Woman's Christian Temperance Unions and adapt it to a nineteenth-century Australian setting meant that her oratory and writings were at the vanguard of modern medical ideas on how alcohol addiction should be treated.

In response to witnessing deaths because of alcohol addiction, and Lee's experiences of living in the gold towns of Daylesford and Enochs Point (Victoria), Lee grew into an indefatigable public campaigner against alcoholic beverages, 'the demon drink'. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), of which Lee became a Victorian member and leader, was an organization of women who were devoted to social reform; they perceived alcoholism as a cause and consequence of larger social problems. Through promoting temperance and reducing or banning the drinking and trade of alcohol, the WCTU believed society would improve the lives of women, children, and society. Through her leadership of the WCTU in the late nineteenth century, Lee argued that social problems such as drunkenness, violence, crime, family desertion, neglect of children, and madness needed to be tackled with a range of approaches. Lee and the WCTU worked to change the social environment that considered drunkenness as an inherited sin, a weakness that required punishment. Viewing alcohol as an external force and personifying it as a monster of demonic proportions allowed Lee to help victims of alcoholism disassociate themselves from the shame of addiction. Lee included other analogies, such as the dehumanising system of slavery, to articulate the inherently evil nature of the drink industry. By condemning the profiteers of alcoholic beverages as opposed to demonising the 'drunkard', she was also able to transform people's lives and help them commit to a temperance lifestyle. In addition to addressing the social environment, Lee and the WCTU also aimed to help strengthen the inner, physical, and spiritual world of victims of alcoholic addiction by encouraging a commitment to a Christian lifestyle and diet.

Lee Vickery's childhood and teenage years

Lee Vickery was born in the Victorian gold-mining town of Daylesford in 1860. Her father was a butcher and, like many Victorians at the time, also tried his hand at gold

³ Cowie, *One of Australia's Daughters*, 2.

⁴ Cowie, *One of Australia's Daughters*, 5.

mining. At the age of 8 Lee's mother died of consumption and so Lee and her six siblings were separated and sent to live with relatives. Lee spent time with an aunt and uncle in Footscray, where she experienced terrible physical abuse on account of their alcoholic drinking habits.⁵ Once Lee's father heard about the mistreatment of his daughter, he relocated her to Enochs Point to live with an aunt and uncle, and it was here she spent her teenage years. Lee became acquainted with Evangelical Christianity that was experiencing, according to Australian theological scholar Associate Professor Stuart Piggin, a second awakening, a revival in popularity and influence.⁶ Evangelicalism appealed to the rugged nature of the gold mining lifestyle, where death, loneliness, and disappointment were so evident in day-to-day life. Evangelicalism's worship did not have all the visual trappings of the Catholic or Anglican Church rituals, but reached out to miners through practical activism, biblical authority, conversion, and atonement. The services were characterised by robust hymn singing and were not gloomy affairs, but life-affirming. It was against this backdrop that Lee cultivated her language of faith. In response to her childhood exposure to violence, and other harrowing experiences of living in the hyper-masculine gold towns of Daylesford and Enochs Point, as a young adult Lee witnessed the development of her criticisms of the many injustices surrounding young families, and most importantly children living in poverty.

At the age of 20 Lee married a railway worker, Harrison Lee, moved to Melbourne, and lived in Footscray and Richmond, depending on where work was available.⁷ Through her involvement in church activities, she befriended and accompanied Victorian philanthropist Dr Singleton in his voluntary work with female prisoners in the Melbourne gaol and refuges. In 1883, Australia was visited by the world-famous Temperance Lecturers RT Booth and W Glover; Lee attended their presentation at the Melbourne Exhibition Buildings and signed the temperance pledge.⁸ Enormous audiences attended their gatherings, and, according to Lee, 'the bit of blue ribbon became conspicuous in every street.'⁹ Lee's experience of this was recorded as:

There came God's message to her to 'bind herself so that others might be free.' She signed the temperance pledge, donned the 'bonny bit of blue', and started on quite a new track 'to bring light to them that sat in darkness.'¹⁰

The significance of these experiences was that Lee was provided with language and rituals to utilise in her public oratory. Rather than demonising victims of alcohol addiction, Lee was able to help members of her crowd who aspired to free themselves of alcohol addiction. Lee emerged as belonging to a band of 'Evangelical temperance workers who prized the testimony of converted ex-drunkards as especially effective in persuading drinkers and alcohol sellers to sign the total abstinence pledge and become Christians.'¹¹

Lee and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union

⁵ Cowie, *One of Australia's Daughters*, 8.

⁶ Stuart Piggin, 'Two Australian Spiritual Awakenings: Moonta Mines 1875 and Loddon River 1883,' *Evangelical Review of Theology* 31, no. 1 (2007): 60-70, 69.

⁷ Cowie, *One of Australia's Daughters*, 45.

⁸ 'The Blue Ribbon Movement,' *Launceston Examiner*, Saturday 26 January 1884, p. 3; 'Mr R.T. Booth on Temperance,' *Clarence and Richmond Examiner and New England Advertiser* (26 May 1888), 3.

⁹ Cowie, *One of Australia's Daughters*, 83.

¹⁰ Cowie, *One of Australia's Daughters*, 83; *Launceston Examiner* (26 January 1884), 3.

¹¹ Katherine A. Chavigny, "'An Army of Reformed Drunkards and Clergymen': The Medicalisation of Habitual Drunkenness, 1857-1910,' *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 69, no. 3 (2013): 383-425, 395.

Following on from the 'Great Awakening' of the Temperance cause in Victoria, branches of the world-famous Women's Christian Temperance Union were formed to bring women into line in waging a war against their deadliest enemy, the drink trade. The WCTU was initially founded in America by a group of women who believed alcohol consumption was the sole reason for the breakdown of families. Initially, the organisation had a singular goal: acting as a lobby group to reduce the number of pub licences, titled 'local option' campaigns. With new leadership under Francis Willard (1839-98), the policy of 'do everything' emanated. Willard widened the objectives of the WCTU from a singular action—promoting the local option campaigns—to encompass other issues such as raising the legal age of consent, participating in missionary work, establishing kindergartens, and educating society about the ills of drink.¹² The WCTU's popularity was such that it had organisations throughout the world including Australia. At the close of the Temperance mission, held in Lee's district, a branch of the WCTU was formed, and she was unanimously elected President of the Footscray Branch, appointed editor of the WCTU page in the *Alliance Record*, the male journal for temperance activism, Colonial Superintendent of literature, and one of the public speakers of the union.¹³ Lee began to embrace a life of activism and injected the language of her childhood to help reframe attitudes toward alcoholism.

Literature on Lee

Examining Lee's activism as a leader of the WCTU can help gain a nuanced understanding of the first-wave women's movement in its multiple forms of education and its influence on social attitudes to drunkenness. Despite Lee's contributions to leadership in the WCTU, scholarly studies about her are still evolving. Decoding her life requires the reading of multiple subjects: evangelicalism, temperance, and colonial and women's history, revealing the breadth of her achievements and places of residence and travel. This paper draws on current Australian, American, British, New Zealand, and Canadian debates over first-wave feminists and their role in changing attitudes to drunkenness.¹⁴

Within the interdisciplinary field of academic study, 1960s scholars in women's studies became interested in the WCTU and other women's organisations and their transnational relationships. The first phase of research published on the First Wave Women's Movement primarily focused on women's suffrage and highlighted the WCTU's contributions to political lobbying and educating the electorate. This paper draws on Audrey Oldfield's detailed descriptions of the suffrage debate in Australia, and, by focusing on Lee specifically, adds new dimensions to Oldfield's overall narrative. She identified that Australian suffrage organisations were supported or initiated by the WCTU, its members often from non-conformist churches. Also, Oldfield discovered that

¹² Dorothy A. Lander, 'A Feminist genealogy of the Women's Temperance Union: Re-membering Ourselves,' *Journal of International Women's Studies* 2, no. 1 (2000).

¹³ Sarah Dalton, 'Cowie, Bessie Lee' (first published in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, 1996), *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3c37/cowie-bessie-lee> (accessed 23 February 2024).

¹⁴ Nancy A. Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of US Feminism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Riiko Bedford, 'Heredity as ideology: Ideas of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of the United States and Ontario on Heredity and Social Reform, 1880-1910,' *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 32, no. 1. (2017): 77-100, Katie Pickles and Angela Wanhalla, 'Embodying the Colonial Encounter: Explaining New Zealand's 'Grace Darling', Huria Matenga,' *Gender & History* 22, no. 2 (2010): 361-386.

whilst the woman suffrage movement was launched in urban Australia, the rural branches were important in 'spreading their tentacles out beyond country towns.'¹⁵

This paper also contributes to the dialogue Patricia Grimshaw initiated in the 1980s, when she observed that Lee and her contemporaries 'extended prevailing ideologies, which stressed women's superior moral and spiritual role within the family, to support the idea of women's role in the larger family, the State.'¹⁶ Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly, in the landmark study *Creating a Nation*, identified Lee as one of four notable colonists who took public stances on issues of social justice in colonial society.¹⁷ Lee was seen as significant because she distinguished structural disadvantages underlying individuals' troubles, be it workers or, in Lee's case, members of a particular sex.

Ian Tyrrell's comprehensive scholarly study first described the WCTU from an international perspective, where he identified the evangelical movement and holiness doctrines as foundational influences on WCTU policies and actions, which also profoundly influenced Lee.¹⁸ Religious discourses, as Tyrrell identified, were never passively received within religious institutions or in the wider culture; instead, they were constantly reinterpreted by women. Despite the 'religious turn' in gender and cultural history, historians of religion have by contrast still produced less sustained research on women, gender, and Lee more specifically.

Recent scholarship has identified that some of the liveliest supporters of women's suffrage came from evangelical communities. Jaqueline deVries' research highlighted how religious belief could and did encourage different, and even oppositional ways of thinking. This led to a questioning of separate spheres as formulated in terms of 'public' and 'private'.¹⁹ Australia's continuous evangelical tradition places Lee at the centre of its sustained development.²⁰ Professor Stuart Piggin linked the growth of evangelicalism taking place in rural Victoria to the environment Lee was exposed to whilst living in Enochs Point. Evangelical women's ability to make sense of human extremity, the strong communities forged in this movement, and the 'salvation for all' ideal, contributed to Lee's skills at political activism.²¹

Professor Clare Wright's research narrates the victory of suffrage for women in Australia and highlights the many public methods of protest utilised.²² In this work, Wright details a political world, local and national, of which Lee was an active part. James Keating furthers the research suggesting how suffragists in Australia and New Zealand connected to their counterparts in the United States and Britain over their shared goal, and worked to position themselves within the internationalist struggle for women's enfranchisement.²³

¹⁵ Audrey Oldfield, *Woman Suffrage in Australia: A gift or a struggle?* (Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 183.

¹⁶ Patricia Grimshaw, 'Bessie Harrison Lee and the Fight for Voluntary Motherhood,' in *Double Time: Women in Victoria, 150 years*, ed. Marilyn Lake and Kelly Farley (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1985), 143.

¹⁷ Patricia Grimshaw, ed., *Creating a Nation, 1788-1900* (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble Publishers, 1994).

¹⁸ Ian Tyrrell, *Woman's World/Woman's Empire: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Jacqueline deVries, 'Rediscovering Christianity after the Postmodern Turn,' *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005): 135-55.

²⁰ Piggin, 'Two Australian Spiritual Awakenings.'

²¹ Piggin, 'Two Australian Spiritual Awakenings.'

²² Clare Wright, *You Daughters of Freedom: The Australians Who Won the Vote* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019).

²³ James Keating, *Distant sisters: Australasian women and the international struggle for the vote, 1880-1914*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

Little attention has been given to the significance of the day-to-day struggle for suffrage in the lives of ordinary members, as well as their role in the campaign. Keating's research has remedied this void and helped position Lee as integral to mobilising these urban and rural members.

Illuminating the learning that takes place in non-traditional environments, Michael O'Malley's work identifies the problematic processes of dominant discourses, such as patriarchy.²⁴ This provides the framework to view Lee's public speaking as 'developing counter discursive strategies'.²⁵ Paolo Freire's pedagogical frame also informs a study of Lee's activism. The spirit of his comment, 'We learn and teach democracy by making democracy', marries perfectly with Lee and the WCTU's aim to equip women with the knowledge and practical skills of why and how laws could be changed.²⁶

Scholarship on the medical discourse surrounding alcohol

Studying Lee's leadership and the WCTU allows new pathways through which to evaluate how temperance organisations adapted contemporary ideas about alcohol and medicine. The scholar Gerald Olsen, for example, linked the interconnections between the medical community and the temperance movement.²⁷ Greater scientific knowledge and surgical, therapeutic, and pharmaceutical capabilities later diminished the reliance on alcohol as food and medicine, first in theory, then in practice. Olsen maps the nineteenth-century debates on the medicinal value of alcohol, and it is here where Lee and the WCTU find their platform for promoting a temperance lifestyle. Not only was drinking alcohol bad for health, but Olsen also highlighted that in many churches, drunkenness was regarded as sinful. Progressive reformers targeted alcohol as a promoter of social degeneracy, furthering the moralist position. Degenerationists such as the French physician Bénédict Augustin Morel were popularised by American social and medical journals. They argued that 'conditions like pauperism, criminality, intemperance, and insanity originated in parents' bad habits, which they bequeathed to their children in the form of damaged constitutions or diatheses.'²⁸ Rosenberg identified that these beliefs later informed eugenics; training, treatment, and environmental reform where it was argued that the reverse of degeneration could occur, although it was generally assumed that 'hereditary inebriates' required longer treatment times and more active restraint.²⁹ Lee's publications 'Marriage and heredity', and 'Marriage, heredity and the social evil' evidence Rosenberg's discussion.³⁰ Social and institutional responses to alcoholism were characterised by an evolving range of approaches to treat this affliction, including the reframing of alcoholism as a disease.³¹ Lee's oratory and writings on the complexity of

²⁴ Michael P. O'Malley, Jennifer A. Sandlin and Jake Burdick, 'Public Pedagogy Theories, Methodologies and Ethics,' in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1131>

²⁵ O'Malley, Sandlin and Burdick, 'Public Pedagogy Theories,' 5.

²⁶ Héctor Melero and Inés Gil-Jaurena, 'Learning by participation in social movements: Ethnographic research in Madrid,' *Australian Journal of Adult Education* 59, no. 3 (2019).

²⁷ Gerald W. Olsen, 'Physician heal thyself': drink, temperance and the medical question in the Victorian and Edwardian Church of England, 1830-1914,' *Addiction* 89 (1994): 1167-1176.

²⁸ Charles E. Rosenberg, 'The Bitter Fruit: Heredity Disease, and Social Thought,' in *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 25.

²⁹ John C. Waller, 'The Illusion of an Explanation': The Concept of Hereditary Disease, 1770-1870,' *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 57, no. 4 (2002): 410-448.

³⁰ Bessie H. Lee, *Marriage and heredity* (Melbourne: J.J. Howard, 1893); Bessie H. Lee, *Marriage, heredity and the social evil* (London: H.J. Osborn, 1903).

³¹ Victor B. Stolberg, 'A Review of Perspectives on Alcohol and Alcoholism in the History of American

alcohol and its negative effects on newborns employ terminology informed by Rosenberg's observations. Dr Chavigny's research acknowledged that 'the role played by evangelical religion in constituting their agency in the historical process of medicalisation has not been adequately explored' and it is here where studying Chavigny's work illuminates the significance of Lee and the WCTU's contributions to the debates surrounding the causation of and cure for drunkenness.³²

Dr Singleton, a contemporary philanthropist who worked with Lee, denounced drunkenness and argued that in Australia it:

[A]bounded to an alarming extent and the quantities of liquor consumed vastly exceeded that of any country in which a statistical return had been taken in comparison with the population.³³

The historian Pryor also confirmed Singleton's criticism, where he startlingly claimed that in:

1855, 75 percent of the deaths of Victorian Criminals, 60 percent of deaths of lunatics, 35 percent deaths of adult males, and 33 percent of coroners cases were the result of chronic alcoholism.³⁴

Contemporaries noted that many white women on the Victorian goldfields lived a more active and independent life than they would have in England.³⁵ In the unique environment of the gold-digging towns, the accessibility to alcohol, however, was a toxic environment for violence against women and this was attested by Lee's observations. Women suffered from alcohol abuse disproportionately; serious drinking was considered a male prerogative and the 'pub', in the Australian context, was almost exclusively a male institution.³⁶ Barbara Epstein argued that alcohol in the American environment 'turned gentle fathers and husbands into brutes.'³⁷ From Lee's first-hand observations, she noted the helplessness of wives to protect themselves and their children from a husband's power, or of other women to help them, given women's vulnerable legal and economic position. Lee wrote about the harsh treatment she experienced while under the care of her aunt and uncle: 'my bruised and blackened body would give evidence that drink had the ascendancy.'³⁸ Drawing on personal encounters like Lee's, criminal records, and lunacy asylum admissions, international temperance historians have acknowledged multiple explanations for the rise in temperance sensibilities as a response to industrialisation and

Health and Medicine,' *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse* 5, no. 4 (2006): 39-106.

³² Chavigny, 'An army of Reformed Drunkards and Clergymen,' 383.

³³ John Singleton, *Narrative of Incidents in the Eventful life of a Physician* (Melbourne: M.L. Hutchinson, 1891), 103.

³⁴ Robin J. Pryor, 'Gold Rush and Health,' *Melbourne Historical Journal* 2, no. 1 (1962): 59-62, 4.

³⁵ Sarah Davenport, *Sketch of an immigrant's life in Australia 1841-1867, [extracts] from the diary of Mrs Sarah Davenport* (Melbourne: State Library of Victoria's manuscripts collection, MS 9784); William Howitt, *Land, Labour and Gold, or, Two years in Victoria: with visits to Sydney and Van Diemen's Land* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855).

³⁶ A. M. Mitchell, 'Temperance and the Liquor Question in Later 19th Century Victoria' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1966).

³⁷ Barbara L. Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 102; Diane Kirkby, *Barmaids: A History of Women's Work in Pubs* (Oakleigh, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³⁸ Cowie, *One of Australia's Daughters*, 8.

urbanisation in the nineteenth century.³⁹

Associate Professor Sarah Tracey argued that the treatment practices in two types of institutions— asylums or those with a religious philosophy— were quite similar. Inmates were required to ‘stop drinking immediately upon admission, tapering off in either homes or asylums... a routine, nutritious diet, and after about two weeks, light exercise or work.’⁴⁰ The inebriate asylum advocates endorsed the principle that ‘intemperance is a disease... curable in the same sense that other diseases are.’⁴¹ Dr. Timothy Hickman, from Lancaster University, wrote about the medicalisation of alcohol addiction and the contemporary ‘Gold Cure’ or ‘Keeley’s Gold Cure’ in the nineteenth century. The ‘Gold Cure’ was developed by pharmacists, where gold chloride, the active agent in the liquid dose, was believed to cure alcoholism.⁴² Hickman argues that despite the struggle between the multiple ways of conceptualising and treating addiction, the ultimate winner of the debate was medicalization itself; whichever therapy a patient chose, mainstream or market, both understood addiction to be a medical problem, requiring a medical solution.⁴³

Multiple approaches

The disease concept of drunkenness was a major source of controversy among Victorians, medical and non-medical alike. It aroused emotions because it challenged traditional beliefs in free will and responsibility. Lee’s writings and actions indicated that social problems such as drunkenness, violence, crime, family desertion, neglect of children, and madness needed to be tackled with multiple approaches to address both the physical and spiritual health of alcoholics.

Viewing alcohol as an external force, personifying it as a monster of demonic proportions, allowed Lee to help victims of alcoholism disassociate themselves from the shame of addiction. By condemning the profiteers of alcoholic beverages, as opposed to demonising the ‘drunkard’, Lee was also able to transform people’s lives and commit them to a temperance lifestyle. She was an example of what a survivor looked like. Drawing on her experience as a young girl subjected to alcohol violence, she was far from meek in her determination to promote a spiritual and physical pathway that provided a road out of alcohol dependence—or, in Lee’s terms, a ‘pure lifestyle’. Lee stipulated that class was no barrier: ‘God has proved that a girl without education, money, influence, position, or friends can rise to any eminence.’⁴⁴

With Lee’s leadership, the WCTU saw that the responsibility for social problems such as drunkenness, violence, crime, family desertion, neglect of children and madness lay with society.⁴⁵ While Lee herself and the WCTU did provide charitable relief to the

³⁹ Holly B. Fletcher, *Gender and the American Temperance Movement of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2008); Jack Blocker, Jr., *Give to the Winds thy Fears: Woman’s Crusade, 1873-1874* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985); Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Stephen Garton, *Medicine and Madness: a social history of insanity in New South Wales 1880-1940* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales Press, 1988).

⁴⁰ Sarah W. Tracy, *Alcoholism in America: From Reconstruction to Prohibition* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 99.

⁴¹ Chavigny, ‘An army of reformed drunkards and clergymen,’ 407.

⁴² Timothy A. Hickman, ‘“We Belt the World”: Dr Leslie E Keeley’s ‘Gold Cure’ and the Medicalisation of Addiction in 1890s London,’ *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 95, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 198-226, 198.

⁴³ Hickman, ‘We Belt the World,’ 198.

⁴⁴ Cowie, *One of Australia’s Daughters*, 153.

⁴⁵ Garton, *Medicine and Madness*; Peter McCandless, ‘Cures of Civilization’: Insanity and Drunkenness in Victorian Britain, *British Journal of Addiction*, 79 (1984): 49-58, 50.

poor, they also worked to change the social environment that considered drunkenness as a sin, a self-inflicted weakness that required punishment. In the 1850s, overseas and colonial doctors had referred to inebriety as a disease; yet its curability was in doubt. Gradually, authorities and representatives from churches and charities in the late nineteenth century began to believe that inebriates placed in a therapeutic environment, with treatments such as gold salts, strychnine and atropine injections, could be restored to bodily health if allowed sufficient time to regain their moral fibre. In this environment, the individual's morality that depended on self-restraint could be nurtured and healed.⁴⁶ Lee and the WCTU's methodology illustrated how ideas on the rehabilitation of alcoholics challenged and transformed contemporary thinking. Lee not only endorsed the above theories, but she was at the forefront of this thinking. Lee wrote compassionately and argued that 'we all want washing of our sins' and affirmed that through a combination of temperance commitment and society's support 'the cause of righteousness and sobriety would triumph.'⁴⁷ She made space for other people's poor life circumstances with an expression of dignity.

Lee's writing career

Lee supplemented her lobbying activities by producing works of fiction that aimed at shaping Australian culture and morals. In close dialogue with developments in the American WCTU, the Australian branch similarly focused on influencing popular culture by directly offering, through its publications, 'pure' literature of their creation, rather than by simply monitoring and censoring cultural forms others produced. Lee's literature was characteristically melodramatic, containing stereotyped characters, extreme states of being and danger, rapid action, and the vindication of virtue over vice. Similar to the New Zealand WCTU trend, Lee demonstrated that she, too, was part of a transnational community of women who were using fiction to promote the prohibition cause.⁴⁸ Her writing demonstrated her attention to people, and she provided a commentary on living and working conditions in various places throughout Victoria to bring to the attention of the middle and upper classes the conditions of the poorer classes of both genders. The *Union Signal*, the American WCTU's official newspaper, repeated the narrative formula. Lee, in a similar spirit, wrote her narrative framework, which featured a woman and her children being abused and destroyed by a husband and father addicted to drink. The wife and mother had no legal or political remedies. This style of narrative was also featured in the WCTU and Lee's publications, where her characters through colourful language attempted to 'put grand alcohol to flight'.⁴⁹ Lee did this by granting her female characters the power to be the judges of morality. In the serialised novel *Tempted and Tried, The Story of Two Sisters*, Lee similarly wrote about practical women who worked hard to earn a living, support their families, and remain devoted Christians.⁵⁰ Writers such as Lee capitalised on nineteenth-century images of pure, refined women by juxtaposing them with equally vivid portraits of degenerate drunks. Alcohol was portrayed as 'the devil', and women as God's

⁴⁶ F.B. Smith, 'Curing alcoholism in Australia, 1880s-1920s,' *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 8 (2006): 137-158

⁴⁷ *The White Ribbon Signal* (December 1892), 20; 'Mrs. Harrison Lee Mission', *Gympie Times and Mary River Mining Gazette* (20 July 1893), 3.

⁴⁸ Kirstine Moffat, 'The Demon Drink: Prohibition Novels, 1882-1924', *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 23, no. 1 (2005): 139-161, 139.

⁴⁹ Bessie Lee, 'Auntie Faith's Travels,' *The Alliance Record* (29 November 1890), 2.

⁵⁰ Bessie Lee, 'Tempted and Tried, The Story of Two Sisters,' *The Australian Journal, A Family Newspaper of Literature and Science* (Melbourne: Clarso, Massina & Co., 1865-1962), February 1888 to July 1888.

messengers. Lee's novel was printed on the front cover of *The Australian Journal*, alongside works by Charles Dickens, Australian poetry, and both national and international news. This was significant because Lee's novel featured the love and dedication of sisters who were central to the family's financial and spiritual success, as opposed to a senior male fatherly figure.

Children's Literature

Within Lee's published fiction there was a noticeable reversal of conventional gender roles; a girl, not a boy, was the religious, saintly reformer, a moral 'feminine' hero rather than a hero who performed acts of physical prowess. In the four series of *Mrs Pumpkin's Visit to Town as Colonial Quizzo* gender issues figured subtly and both challenged and reinstated convention in new contexts.⁵¹ Rather than retain the masculine prerogative of taking a social glass of alcohol now and then, real manliness, according to the WCTU, lay in keeping promises and following one's written commitment. Those who thought it was 'manly' to drink were regarded as 'poor, silly, weak boys whose fake friends easily tempt them.'⁵² Rather, the fictional characters Mr and Mrs Pumpkin urged young men to 'have courage [...] to say no.'⁵³ Through these descriptive narratives, published in serialised form in the WCTU section of the *Alliance Record* and in book form, Lee promoted the idea that 'gentleness did not mean weakness.'⁵⁴ In *Mrs Pumpkin's Visit to Town*, Bartholomew agrees to pray as instructed by Mrs Pumpkin. She proudly says: 'My Bartholomew was ready to do anything and give everything.'⁵⁵ The interplay between characters concerned the trials of alcoholics and their families; they were entertaining melodramas with a didactic function in promoting the union's aims to separate the victim from the 'demon drink'.

As well as addressing the WCTU's aims, the stories in Lee's fictional writing provided a less confrontational method of social questioning. The stories played out her ideas with characters such as Sarah Pumpkin and Sally Pumpkin.⁵⁶ The latter was an able selector's wife who could turn her hand to everything. She emerged as a practical, energetic, and competent woman, endowed with an informed common sense, an exemplary figure. Lee employed a conversational narrative and self-deprecating sense of humour. Sally Pumpkin in *Mrs Pumpkin's Visits to Town as Colonial Quizzo* declares:

I'm only an old woman from the country ... now where will I begin to tell you about our work in the country. I reckon the spellin [sic] ain't perhaps quite kerrect [sic].⁵⁷

Lee's contribution to WCTU literature was therefore a refining and elevating influence that was used as a means to develop women and children's characters. It became a tool for reformers who did not wholly or willingly become passive audiences; instead, they asserted their rights to be the arbiters of culture. In *Mrs Pumpkin in the Country as Colonial*

⁵¹ Bessie H. Lee, *Mrs Pumpkin's Visit to Town (as Colonial Quizzo)* series 1 (Melbourne: J.J. Howard, [190-]; Bessie H. Lee, *Mrs Pumpkin in the Country (as Colonial Quizzo)* series 2 (London: National Temperance Union, [190-]); Bessie H. Lee, *Mrs Pumpkin Again (as Colonial Quizzo)* series 3 (National Temperance League, [190-]); Bessie H. Lee, *Mrs Pumpkin Back Again (as Colonial Quizzo)* (London: Ideal Publishing Union, [190-]).

⁵² *Alliance Record* (12 December 1891).

⁵³ *Alliance Record* (12 December 1891).

⁵⁴ *Broadford Courier and Reedy Creek Times* (6 June 1891).

⁵⁵ Lee, *Mrs Pumpkin*, series 1.

⁵⁶ *Alliance Record* (8 August 1891), 203.

⁵⁷ *Alliance Record* (12 December 1891).

Quizzo, Bartholomew continually highlights: ‘Mother, is goin to get lots of wholesome literature to give to everybody up in our part.’⁵⁸ WCTU laywomen therefore embraced a multiplicity of roles, one of which was teaching moral issues to change behaviours. Mainstream publications reported that:

Mrs Lee told the children a ‘fairy story’ in which a wicked giant (strong drink) destroyed the king’s house (a human body), a story so cleverly constructed and so well told that its lesson must be an abiding memory to those who were old enough to understand it. A short address was also given to the parents present, an appeal to them to do what they could to save the children from the risk of becoming drunkards.⁵⁹

Another example of Lee’s publications directed at a children’s audience were such titles as *Auntie Faith’s Travels* and *Auntie Faith’s Rhymes*. In children’s literature, she wrote:

Well my pets, I had been working for over twenty years in many lands to put Giant Alcohol to flight and one year in Victoria I helped in the big work of getting temperance wall sheets put up in every State school and every Catholic school in the land. Then I went to lovely little New Zealand, the southernmost point of the British Empire, and worked in the great Local Option contest there to close the tempting liquor bars, that our children might be saved from the cruel destroyer, drink...⁶⁰

Lee’s commentary provides a window into a specific moment of Lee and the WCTU’s crusade against alcohol. It was different from the settler narrative as here alcohol was perceived as a male problem, the effects of which adversely affected women.

The power of language

Early in Lee’s career as a leader in the WCTU she wrote:

[W]e build up a distorted, horrible image of God, and we fear and hate the creation of our own minds and daily try to either buy its favour or to drag down and destroy this hellish monster we have fashioned for ourselves and dubbed with the name of God.⁶¹

Lee was aware of this self-hatred and self-loathing from her observations as a girl watching the miners behave in self-destructive behaviours. She wrote:

[M]en have set up Satan, with all his cruelty, oppression and tyranny, on the throne of their imaginations and called him God, and then with despairing hatred have tried to dethrone the monster, preferring to have no God rather than a God of cruelty.⁶²

⁵⁸ *Alliance Record* (12 December 1891).

⁵⁹ Mrs Harrison Lee, *South Canterbury Times*, issue 2569 (21 August 1899).

⁶⁰ Mrs Harrison Lee Cowie, *Auntie Faith’s Travels* (London: Richard J James Temperance Publishing House,

⁶¹ Cowie, *One of Australia’s Daughters*, 59.

⁶² Cowie, *One of Australia’s Daughters*.

From these observations Lee's work adopted multiple lines of attack at the urban and rural frontier. Her role as a temperance writer and activist signalled the intricacies of early Australian temperance movements, which not only operated and adapted the organisational framework established by the WCTU of the United States of America and the British Women's Temperance Association, but forged an organisation equipped to tackle the Australian environment. Lee was at the crossroads of transforming the image of the pious and domestically submissive woman into one versed in evangelical teaching, confident in speaking out about the Demon drink. Using terms such as 'monster' and demonic imagery, Lee and the WCTU were able to capture female discontent, or more accurately, terror. In public newspapers both in Australia and New Zealand Lee narrated how:

[S]he came to take up temperance work from personally experiencing the impossibility of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked in families where drink habits held sway. She drew a contrast between two conditions of the same home she knew before and after the demon of drink had been expelled... she appealed to all her sisters to help in saving the boys from the demon drink.⁶³

⁶³ 'Mrs Harrison Lee at Greatford,' *Wanganui Chronicle* XLIII, no. 15000 (23 May 1899).

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TUESDAY, July 31st, 8 p.m.—GRAND PUBLIC RECEPTION.
WEDNESDAY, August 1st, 3 p.m.—GREAT WOMEN'S MEETING.
WEDNESDAY, August 1st, 8 p.m.—
THURSDAY, August 2nd, 8 p.m. **CAMPAIGN LECTURES.**
FRIDAY, August 3rd, 8 p.m.
SUNDAY, August 6th, 3 p.m.—UNITED SERVICE.

TITLES OF LECTURES—“Liquor versus Labour”; “The Diamond Drills of Queensland”; “Fencing the Precipice”;
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SPECIAL SINGING BY UNITED CHOIR CONDUCTED BY MR. T. PARKER.

ALL MEETINGS FREE. COLLECTION TO DEFRAY EXPENSES.

MONDAY, August 6th, at 8 p.m.
GRAND ILLUSTRATED LECTURE: “Beautiful Britain.”
ADMISSION, ONE SHILLING.

MONSTER PROCESSION on Tuesday, July 31st,
from Cutting, West Ipswich, and Olympic Hall, North Ipswich, headed by City Band and Salvation Army Band.
All Temperance Workers invited to take part.

Saturday, August 4th, BLACKSTONE SCHOOL OF ARTS, at 8 p.m.

Tuesday, August 7, ROSEWOOD FARMERS' HALL, at 2.30 and 7.45 p.m.

The Queensland Times, Ltd., Printers, Ipswich.

Slavery

In WCTU literature, alcoholism was often likened to slavery, with the intoxicated as the slaves and the publicans as slave owners.⁶⁴ Like slavery, the drink trade was trafficking human misery, sanctioned by the law and community, for the material gain of a small group of people. Many of the early nineteenth century temperance advocates in Britain and the United States had also been abolitionists.⁶⁵ The moral and political concepts of abolition had left their mark on the Protestant churches, of which so many temperance advocates were members. Temperance historian Brian Harrison argued that the abolitionist movement had a significant ideological impact on later British and colonial social reform movements, not only shaping attitudes to what could be achieved politically and socially through concerted action, but also highlighting the detrimental systematic social impact

⁶⁴ Ian Tyrrell, ‘Women and Temperance in Antebellum America, 1830-1860,’ *Civil War History* 28, no. 2 (1982): 128-152, 129.

⁶⁵ Lander, ‘A Feminist Genealogy,’ 374.

of the liquor industry.⁶⁶ Temperance advocates believed that the law should punish those who were truly responsible for alcoholism, those who sold the drink, and not the victims. Like antislavery, temperance included a political dimension. Temperance advocates not only believed that alcoholic drink was the primary cause of violence: a strong theme in temperance speeches and writings was the idea that the publicans, brewers, distillers, and winemakers were responsible for heavy drinking within society and the damage that followed.⁶⁷ By seeking to limit hotel licences, temperance advocates saw themselves as rescuing the inebriated. Lee and the WCTU asked: 'why should our youth of both sexes be destroyed by strong drink to enrich a few monopolies?'⁶⁸ It is no coincidence that during Lee's first public tour of England in 1896 she was invited to speak at Exeter Hall in London: symbolically, the location had a history of being a public meeting place for progressive thinkers from the humanist tradition. It had been the meeting place for the Anti Corn Law League in 1846, the Royal Humane Society, and the Anti-Slavery Society; in fact, Exeter Hall became a synonym for the Anti-Slave Lobby.

Conclusion

In championing those who had crawled their way out of alcohol dependence, Lee and the WCTU drew on contemporary developments in the British, Northern American, New Zealand and Canadian medical and temperance communities to formulate a multifaceted approach to dissuade people from the consumption and trading of alcohol. By representing alcohol as the 'devil', 'a giant' or other personifications, Lee and the WCTU carried out a campaign in children's literature and public spaces to promote a temperance lifestyle without demonising the addicts of alcohol or the families affected by drink-related violence. It was Lee's skills at crafting language that enabled her to navigate the delicate pathway between adopting modern medical directives on supporting those with alcohol addictions without threatening the integrity of the evangelical churches. Her complex interactions with her audiences in halls, in the open air or through the medium of children's literature and temperance tracts were characterised by optimistic and empowering messages of hope. Lee made space for the victims of alcohol addiction to heal embracing transnational ideas of medical and spiritual nurturing and reconfiguring them to suit the Australian environment.

⁶⁶ Brian Harrison, 'Religion and Recreation in Nineteenth-Century England,' *Past and Present* 38 (December 1967): 98-125, 120.

⁶⁷ Dawson Burns, *Temperance History: a concise narrative of the rise, development, and extension of the temperance reform* (London: National Temperance Publication Depot, [1889-1891]), 102.

⁶⁸ *White Ribbon* (December 1892), 20, 35.



Bessie Lee c. 1890, Yeoman & Co, Melbourne. [National Portrait Gallery](#).