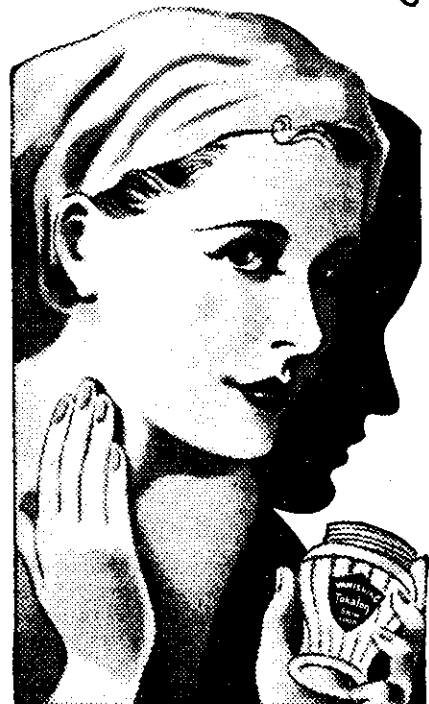


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## WELLINGTON ROUNABOUT

By "Thid"

### ABOUT BEER

CHRISTMAS and the New Year in Wellington were convivial occasions.

I have never been connected with the purveying trade, or compiled statistics for the W.C.T.U. If you saw me in the street, in fact, you would say, if you were a teetotaler: "I'm sure that nice man never touches drink." And if you were off the water waggon you would say: "He holds it well." In brief, I am neutral. So I am safe from any charges of bias when I say the holidays were convivial.

Wherever I have been in Wellington during the last two weeks I have encountered beer. Beer being swilled, beer being sipped, sucked, or sighed over; beer in pubs, beer in homes, beer in gardens, beer on the sea, beer on the sand, beer on the streets, round corners, in shop entrances, on stairs, in fat men and thin men; flowing down their throats, spilled over their waistcoats, dripping from their whiskers, soaking their cigarettes. It has been amazing.

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### It Flows Freely Elsewhere

On the West Coast they are supposed to use a good drop of beer during the year, by the simple artifice of taking it when they can from foot-high glasses. Dunedin too has been famous for beer since Johnny Jones first walked the track to Waikouaiti. Invercargill, as everyone knows, is a place where beer comes and goes as mysteriously but as plentifully as in Oamaru or Ashburton. In Auckland, in spite of the climate, they know the difference between a long beer and a pint pot. In fact it was Auckland which first showed me the endless chain system of small boys waiting on the empties. Beer flows generously all the year round from Makara to Paekakariki, from Tokomaru to Golden Bay, from Tauranga to Kawhia.

### —But Wellington Beats Them All

But I do not think it has ever flowed anywhere as fast and as long as it flowed in Wellington last week, with the old year floating out with the dregs and the new year coming in on the froth.

Of all the industries I can think of, the brewing industry is the most economical. While woollen mills annually spend £400,000 to pay 3,000 people to weave cloth, the breweries spend £300,000 to pay 1,000 people to brew beer; and for their expenditure the woollen mills put out only a little more than £1,000,000 worth of goods, whereas the breweries, spending so much less on so many fewer employees, put out nearly £3,000,000 worth of beer. I should imagine, too, that materials are less costly for the breweries, for water is cheap, and beer is at least 96 per cent. water.

### Thirteen Million Gallons

Except for a small minority of the population, it seems to me that New Zealanders in the mass use water only for washing. There can be little room for its consumption as a beverage when we dispose annually of no less a quantity than 13,619,000 gallons of beer.

That sounds a lot, and I have to confess to statistical trickery, for it means only 8.6 gallons per head per annum. But my case is that the point six of a gallon is drunk per annum and the eight gallons per Christmas. The Census and Statistics Department will not confirm this, but I know, for I have seen it happening during the last few days. Of the £978,437 washed into the national exchequer by beer (before the tax was increased) I should estimate on the same basis that the £78,000

comes in during the year and the £900,000 during the two weeks at the end and the beginning.

### High Spirits

This does not count duty on imported beer, which is helped by spirits ("potable liquors") in the useful job of giving the Customs Department 25 per cent. of its total revenue. Spirits come off rather better than beer among the imports, as a matter of fact. They used to cost us about £800,000 a year, but good-bye to all that in these difficult times, no matter how savagely the two-bottle men may gnash their teeth.

As far as figures can be amazing—for statistics are dull stuff—these figures are amazing. But the actuality is what interests me more than the record of production and consumption, profit and loss.

### Dull Until It's Drunk

Making the beer is an interesting enough process. Carting it and storing it and getting it ready to serve are all interesting milestones on the long road between the hop and the swallow. A good deal of science and ingenuity have to be applied: for beer, I believe, is as delicately balanced a chemical combination as milk.

Still, it has not been all this which has made Christmas and New Year so amazing for us neutrals. Beer in a tun, in a vat, or a keg; or beer, as the vernacular has it, in a rigger, a pig, or a winnie—that is beer when it is just beer. It only begins to play a really notable part in the affairs of man when it's been drunk. That's where I come in, to see how it makes one man fall backward and another flat on his face; to wonder why one man can talk through it but can't walk; or why one can walk but can't talk.

And why should one man who has had beer discover more fun than his sober fellows in sitting on a dustbin, playing the tin whistle? Why should one laugh at the world through amber coloured glasses while a fellow tippler can only quarrel? Why must a man have beer before he'll sing? Why is a joke most pointed when the brain's most dulled?

### An Impersonal View

I hasten to say that I have no quarrel with beer, or with all those good people who either drink it or condemn it. This is a purely abstract study. My only anxiety is that these comments should offend neither the wowsers nor the wets. I'm trying to sit on the fence.

All the same, I do wonder at these strange things: why the most perfected human organism we know of on the earth should be most contented when it's most out of action.

I have first-hand information that troops of the X— army, making their last desperate drive on Y—, in 1922, came unexpectedly on plentiful supplies of beer and spirits. There the drive ended.

So even the higher manifestations of our civilisation succumb to the lowly beverage. When he's drunk, a man cannot even go to war.

The moral, of course, is adjustable to the point of view.

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