

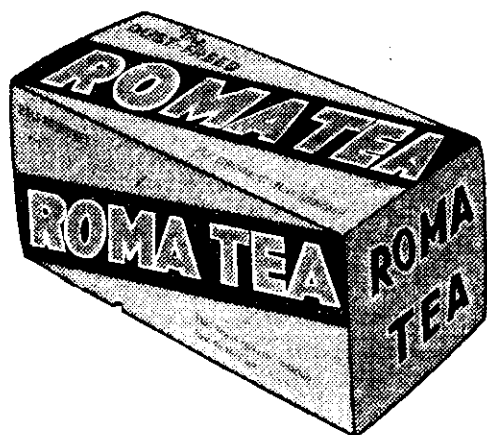


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Taverns in the Towns

PROFESSOR D. C. MARSH, formerly of Victoria University College, and now at Nottingham, was reported from London to have been outspoken about drinking habits in New Zealand. This was not surprising. No civilised person could fail to be shocked by the results of six o'clock closing, or dismayed by irrational opposition to reform. Nor can it be surprising if Professor Marsh believes that women's votes were decisive in the referendum of 1949. There is no way of knowing how the women voted; but it is a fair assumption that most of them "wanted their husbands home at night." To support this assumption, however, Professor Marsh went on to suggest that women in New Zealand "have far more power behind the scenes than they have in England." And he added: "It is a matriarchal country."

The full text of the speech from which these remarks were taken is not available. Possibly there was a bridge of ideas or opinions between the first statement, that women insisted on keeping to six o'clock closing, and the second statement, that we live in a matriarchal society. As they stand in the cabled report, however, they have no logical connection. There are several possible reasons why women voted against an extension of hotel hours in 1949, and they have nothing to do with matriarchy. One reason was undoubtedly a dislike of liquor, simple and absolute. If liquor was regarded as an evil, then—according to these people—it should be prohibited. True, the nation had shown at successive polls that a growing majority did not intend to abandon a social amenity because some people abused it. Continuance had been given unmistakable support, and it seemed reasonable to argue that in those circumstances the best course was to reduce the weaknesses of the trade by providing better conditions. If, however, a woman be-

lieves a thing to be evil, and cannot get rid of it altogether, her next thought is to have as little of it as possible. And although, as experience has shown, six o'clock closing does not mean less drinking, it is easy to understand the simplified and mistaken view that extended hours must mean more drinking. These ideas were by no means confined to women.

There was another and much stronger reason why women voted for six o'clock closing. The social graces of the English "local," remembered wistfully by New Zealanders who have been abroad, could not have been summoned into existence by a referendum. There are very few suburban hotels in New Zealand: urban licences are now distributed mainly in the heart of the city. Many women must have assumed that, if hours were extended, they would have no opportunity of sharing the new amenities with their husbands. Men who call in at the pub on their way home are not likely to postpone their visit until later in the evening, especially if to do so means another journey from the suburbs. Only in the country, where conditions are suitable for evening drinking, could hotel life be given the atmosphere of a "local."

Bar services in New Zealand cities are organised almost exclusively for men. A synthetic masculinity has attached itself to public drinking, so that not surprisingly our licensing system has come to be looked upon with wonder and disapproval by the outside world. Under present conditions an extension of hours would not by itself bring us into line with civilised countries. And how are the conditions to be changed? There are a few signs of improvement and of a desire for something better; but six o'clock closing, and the drunkenness which comes inevitably from it, have set up an emotional attitude, especially in women, which will make reform slow and difficult.

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 25, 1955.