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# Brewers and Bandsmen: the Tooth's Brewery Band, 1927-1932

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From the 1880s to the 1930s, the brass band - imported from Britain but subtly adapted to its new environment - was an important feature of musical life and popular culture in Australia. In addition to playing a major educational role of extending opportunities for both amateur music-making and popular music appreciation, brass bands were an ever-present accompaniment to outdoor gatherings, community celebrations, and formal public occasions of every shape and size.

The bands provided free entertainment at sporting venues, on shopping nights in town centres, and on Sunday afternoons in public parks; they raised money for charity on hospital days; they added life and colour to the rituals of the labour movement, especially on 8 Hours Day and at trade-union picnics; and they offered their devotees a new competitive team sport in the form of brass band contests.

Despite this, no serious account of the brass band's place in Australian social or musical history has yet been produced. It is easy to see why bands tended to be overlooked in their heyday, and why they have continued to be neglected ever since.

To musical purists, brass bands at best gave imperfect and unauthentic performances of 'great' music, whilst at worst they played trash. To professional instrumentalists, they represented a real practical threat, and the Australian Musicians Union waged intermittent warfare in the early twentieth century to keep work which 'belonged' to its own members out of the clutches of the 'amateur bands' who were prepared to work below union rates.

Finally, because brass bands were small, informal, and often short-lived organisations, it may be assumed that they generated few written records. Few have found their way into libraries and archives.

As a result, the historian of the Australian brass band has to be content with gathering many small fragments of information from a wide range of often unlikely sources.

However, one unusually well-documented band has emerged in the shape of Tooth's Brewery Band, whose brief existence from 1927 to 1932 is meticulously recorded in the papers of the great Sydney brewery, now deposited in the Noel Butlin Archives Centre.

Unfortunately, Tooth's Band was atypical because works bands, associated with (and financially supported by) large companies, were extremely rare in Australia. Nevertheless, the documents cast interesting light, not only on aspects of the brass-band world in the inter-war period, but also on Tooth's attitudes to labour management, and they also provide another reminder to researchers of the rich and unexpected treasures which lie at the Acton Underhill.

The Tooth's Brewery Band papers (N20/4016-4038) include fascinating miscellaneous material, ranging from a solo cornet part for 'Coloney Bogey' via photographs of the band, to concert programmes. But the hard core of the collection consists of three elements:

the correspondence of the band's successive business managers RC Middleton and W Hancock, who acted as company watchdogs and interested themselves in the minutiae of the band's activities;

the incoming and outgoing letters of the band's own secretaries; and

the minutes of both the bandsmen's general meetings and the band commitee meetings.

These records indicate the peculiar character of Tooth's Band as a voluntary self-governing body of workmen/musicians which was nevertheless subject to the ultimate control of the management. The problem of 'who rules' was to be a factor in the band's demise, because conflicts of interest and outlook between board and band were never far from the surface.

How did Tooth's Brewery Band come into existence? It is clear that the proposal to form a works band in May 1927 originated 'from below' with a group of enthusiastic workmen, and that management, forced to decide between simply letting the men go ahead on their own or giving them active material support, opted for the latter, to the remarkable extent of purchasing uniforms and instruments for a full band of 26 players at a cost of just over £1000.

The company also found work for the prospective bandmaster, H S Thomas, paying him a retainer of £1 per week on top of his wage, and subsequently pursuing a policy of providing labouring jobs in the brewery at the bandmaster's recommendation for experienced players who would improve the band's standard.

Tooth's Brewery Band was thus able to side-step the painful problems of raising funds and training players which newly established bands usually face, and it entered the contest field in January 1928 as a fully-fledged, completely-equipped Grade B band. Thereafter, it completed regularly in the annual New South Wales championship, with modest success and also entered other local contests within the state.

In addition, it performed without payment at various charitable fund-raising events in and around Sydney; obtained a series of paid engagements, notably at rugby union fixtures; and played regular lunch-time concerts in the brewery yard for the entertainment of its fellow employees.

For its part, the company continued to contribute to the Band's running costs, both by cash donations and by providing rehearsal facilities, free transport, free beer, and time off work when the Band was due to appear in public.

During the band's first three years, the brewery's management gradually relaxed its day-to-day control, as Middleton decided in February 1929:

that the whole situation can be much better handled by allowing the band to arrive at its own decision on its own way, without any suggestions or advice, and for the company to veto any move where it considers the band is over-stepping its functions.

On this basis, the band seems to have thrived until about the middle of 1930. It easily weathered the storm which blew up when Bandmaster Thomas was deposed by a bandsmen's revolt in July 1929, and its surplus of income over expenditure for the year ending May 1930 was sufficient to produce the band's one-and-only dividend - £140 to be shared among the players, the equivalent of a week's wages each. Yet within two years the band, which had begun so promisingly, collapsed and died. Why?

The obvious short answer is, of course, the severe economic downturn which hit Australia in the early 1930s, and from which Tooth's Brewery was not immune. Faced with falling sales and profits, the Brewery had to cut its output and its labour force, and was not prepared to exempt bandsmen from the round of dismissals which followed.

As early as February 1931, the band's secretary was lamenting that "our bass section is practically wiped out, our fine solo euphonium player lost to us, and our trombone trio split". By January 1932, it appears that only 16 of the players were still working for the company - the rest presumably being either ex-employees, or possibly players recruited elsewhere who had no connection with Tooth's.

In this situation, not only did Tooth's management feel less obligation to keep the band afloat, but at a time of general retrenchment, it also believed it could not afford to subsidise the leisure activities of a tiny minority of its employees and became increasingly unwilling to fund the band. As the band's financial basis had always been precarious, the loss of company support proved fatal.

The brewery had insisted from the beginning that, although paid engagements were acceptable, it would be injurious to "the dignity of the company" if its band was to seek municipal subsidies or take up public collections of its performances. Denied these sources of income - on which most Australian bands relied heavily, the band was also faced with the loss of its paid engagements. This arose partly from the company's acceptance of the trade union argument that unemployed professional musicians should take these, and partly because, at a time of recession, there were in any case fewer paid engagements to go round.

As a result, the band's treasury was virtually empty by May 1932. Its critical situation was highlighted when the management turned down a request for £200 to enable the band to enter the South Street (Ballarat) Contest - the premier Australian inter-state Band competition which had been in abeyance since 1924, but which was scheduled for revival in October 1932.

As the company had been equally hostile to earlier requests of a similar nature, this refusal can have come at no surprise. But it was the last straw, and, as the bitter correspondence between the management and the band revealed, it starkly emphasised the fundamental difference of opinion between the boardroom and the bandroom about the band's function and purpose.

The players, who had been recruited because of their competing musical skills, essentially wanted to create and maintain a good brass band. On the other hand, the company had embarked on an ill-defined exercise in judicious advertising and paternalistic management which sought to bring the brewery favourable publicity within the community at large, enhance its reputation as a 'good' employer, and provide a pleasant, harmless, and entertaining social facility for its employees as a whole.

In the circumstances of 1932, it was obvious which of these two views would prevail. Because the company paid the piper, it could call the tune. Tooth's Brewery survived the Depression of the early 1930s, but its band did not.