

# A drinking society

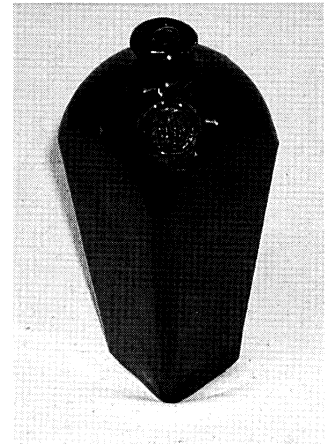
An historical comment on alcohol consumption in the Northern Territory, by Bill Wilson\*

Drunkenness is not a new feature of Territory life; it was a problem in the Northern Territory soon after the turn of the century as the accompanying chart shows. Even though the crude figures appear low, readers might compare them to the totals of other offences reported.

The ethos of the Territory was blamed for the heavy drinking engaged in by much of the population. As Mounted Constable

officer to imbibe rum 'for medicinal purposes'.

The reason behind the low numbers of apprehensions for drunkenness beyond Darwin was that only a small number of police were stationed outside the Territory's main centre. Despite this, drunkenness was prevalent in many small



Square case gin bottle. Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, TH81/007.

## Selected offences reported to Police 1911 - 1925

Offences	1912	1913	1914*	1915	1917*	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925
Breach Aboriginal Act	29	36	27	28	38	22	24	21	74	40	94
Breach Police Act (Street offences)	12	3	31	34	34	14	8	14	13	8	17
<b>Drunkenness</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>341</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>39</b>
Disorderly conduct	-	5	8	9	43	5	3	5	2	3	3
Habitual drunkenness	-	4	3	3	7	-	-	-	-	-	-
Indecent language/indecency	6	7	23	29	59	35	18	12	5	8	13
Supply liquor to Aborigines	13	15	34	35	8	1	5	-	-	-	-
Unlawful possession	2	11	16	22	42	24	23	40	40	9	29

Turner noted about the 1911 - 1925 era, 'men who never drank in their lives have come here and fallen to the square'. The 'square' was gin, the shape of the bottle giving the popular beverage its name. A bottle of gin was cheap. A single bottle, which was one third of a gallon, cost less than three bottles of beer. Considering that the preferred way to drink the gin was to mix it with water, it was possible for the average Territorian to engage in heavy bouts of drinking quite cheaply. Heavy consumption of the drink was despite it's tasting like a mixture of 'naphtha and water'.

Police reports show that very few arrests for drunkenness were made outside Darwin, except in Borroloola. Correspondence suggests that in some places police officers encouraged heavy drinking bouts. In one instance, at the turn of the century, the indigenous Australian population of one town was encouraged by the local police

centres, but police tended to ignore the offence as a local complained in 1907, 'the want of active police supervision for this place is sadly felt. The opium and drink curse are rampant...Energetic men...are wanted for a place like this.'

Drunkenness in the Northern Territory, in particular in Darwin, is not therefore a new phenomenon as some would argue. Excessive drinking of alcohol beverages has been an aspect of life in the Northern Territory since South Australian settlers first arrived. Beer may now be more popular than 'the square' but the Territory population are not yet 'on the square'.



\*Bill Wilson is a former police officer, who is now a PhD student at the Northern Territory University, and is writing a history of the Northern Territory Police Force.

The sources used in compiling this article include the Administrator's Reports, the Tom Turner papers in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, the Borroloola Police Station Prisoner Register, letters and reports held in the Northern Territory Archives and the Northern Territory Times and Gazette. The table was compiled from the Administrator's Reports for the years 1912 to 1925. In the table those years marked with \* indicate reporting periods were utilised for the particular year.