

Swy and the Market

Shaun Patrick Kenaelly

Two-up or swy has a strong claim to being the Australian national game. In earlier forms (like pitch-and-toss and Head-in-Em), it was played (doubtless) by both prisoners and guards aboard the First Fleet. Over the years it has acquired marked national characteristics. The appeal is classless, the rules are fair, it generates intense excitement and it is highly illegal in most States. It was also a game the Anzacs played and it is played still, with the authority of tradition, each year on Anzac Day, wherever returned soldiers gather. In very recent years a temporary legality has been conferred upon it for the one day, 25 April. It was not always so. The police might have turned a blind eye. Sometimes they pounced. Western Australian gaming-squad detectives raided a two-up game in the Ocean Beach hotel at Cottesloe in 1985, arresting 25 old diggers. The oldest was 78. The fine was \$75, with costs. Two-up also has historical associations with race meetings. Two men were charged with operating a game at the Morningson races in December 1962. They had set up in the car-park and attracted a crowd of some 200. Police raided the exclusive Victorian Club on Melbourne Cup eve, 1992. A two-up game had started, apparently quite spontaneously, following the drawing of the traditional Calcutta. Two-up has enjoyed a lawful existence within the Wrest Point Casino since 1974. That despite, it continues to flourish in warehouses, in back-lanes — as press reports of proceedings in the magistrates court reveal.

Serious researchers are more than grateful to such reportage. It provides a substantial foundation for the study of what is otherwise a rather fugitive history. Fortunately, there is also an ancillary literary history. C. J. Dennis makes reference to the Melbourne schools in *The Sentimental Bloke* (1915). He also has *kip*. In Sydney, the legendary *Thommo's* School floated around Darlinghurst from the 1920s on. The Kalgoorlie School has, presumably, existed since the initial gold rushes of the 1890s. The same would be true of the Broken Hill School, which proved so persistent that the last known police raid was in 1947. The Echuca School, raided in December 1978, had existed continuously 'for up to 100 years'. On that occasion, one participant swam the Murray in order to avoid prosecution. The authorities agree that the Anzacs were responsible for *swy*, deriving from *zwei*, the German for *two*. The OED has a useful citation from 1921: 'Just done me last dollar up at the swi school.' Philologically speaking, the topic is of some interest.

An *entrepreneur* may establish a two-up school virtually anywhere there is a piece of even ground. He is the *boxer*, i.e. *keeps the ring*. The game is played on the result of the fall of two pennies tossed in the air: in other words, heads or tails. King George V pennies are generally used, on account of some particular quality found in their minting. Any player who fancies his luck is the *spinner*. He tosses

the coins from a flat wooden board, the *kip*. A *bender* will reach down to replace them between spins. A *cockatoo* or *nit-picker* keeps watch at the door: invitation to the school is usually by personal introduction. The spinner bets that two heads will fall. Someone will cover his bet and side-bets made around the circle. A heads-tails result means he has *oned them* and may spin again. If he wins, he may continue as long as he chooses. This explains why the Bloke should say that he has lost his *former joy* in 'eadin' browns, after he has met Doreen. Two tails means he has lost and another spinner *come in*. White crosses are often painted on the reverse, as an aid to identification. This must account for the superstition that it is exceedingly unlucky for anyone to *cross the ring* between spins — as a pair of tails will invariably follow suit.

A casual acquaintance with the extensive philosophical literature on probability will suffice to show that the odds of success at two-up are pretty much even. It is an exceedingly fair game of chance. The record for an unbroken sequence of heads, 23 in a row, through a number of spinners, is held from Kalgoorlie. But 23 is also a superstitious number and readers of Frege or Carnap may care to discount the claim. Besides, Westralians tend to exaggerate, wildly. Nor can the odds entirely explain the game. To conforming suburbanites belong the *pokie* machines in club and pub, with mindless lever-pulling, the mirror of factory work, and the prospect of three happy lemons with a pealing of bells. Two-up belongs to lanes, warehouses, disused factories and carries the risk of running foul of the law. It surfaces unafraid at fixed calendrical points and at times of social dislocation, such as war. Which was the sense of *Come in Spinner* (1951), the novel by Dymphna Cusack and Florence James. Two-up, as played between floors in the jammed lift of a luxury hotel, is the controlling metaphor for Sydney in wartime. Swy belongs to the city. More precisely, to markets. 'What you lose one night you win back another', as Mrs Cavendish explains to Guinea. For the Sydney of the novel is also a world of rationing, shortages, price-controls and black markets using American hard currency. In other words, a time of economic dislocation. Swy enjoys a season of open enthusiasm because it offers a mirror of the workings of the market economy.

In Melbourne, the school operated by Lionel 'Nappy' Ollington flourished around the north-west corner of the city throughout the 1960s and 1970s. His duels with the head of the gaming squad, Chief Inspector Fred Sylvester ('The Cat'), are legendary among students of the game. On one occasion The Cat broke up play by swinging through a window, on a rope. A perfectly commodious and suitable venue, the Banana Stores (a disused three-storey warehouse in Franklin Street, opposite the Queen Victoria Market), was used on and off, but I was told that it spooked players, as it possessed a ghost, which tapped on the roof. Given the ways Sylvester and his men had of dropping in unexpectedly, this gave people the jitters. The school moved frequently and was known by its current address: the Franklin Street School was the same as the West Melbourne, or North Melbourne, or Queensberry Street. A pattern may be plotted from this. The school moved into premises that circled the Queen Victoria Market; floating, but always keeping very close. The market was the abiding source of regular patronage. In September,

1965, a school was raided *within* the Camberwell Market itself. Excellent: this would follow the pattern. Note also that the Bloke pushed a barrow in the old Eastern Hill Market and that Ginger Mick hawked rabbits. The market is something more than a venue for the sale of staples, wholesale and retail. A way of life attends it, rich and rare like the fruit and veg. Alongside the stallholders are the truckies, rat-catchers and sweepers; the people who sell coffee, soup and hot-dogs from parked vans: all quite legitimate. But they are accompanied by the illicit traders and service industries: SP bookmaking, sly grogging, prostitution, manila games, two-up schools.

It is, surely, *because* the market deals so directly with basic commodities that it encourages an excitement and desire to run risks that is channelled so effectively into swy. It is a world of natural tides and seasons, of often rapid price fluctuations and the centrality of cash transactions. Swy follows the pulse. Likewise, the Broken Hill and Kalgoorlie schools illustrate a game that goes with the metal. The origins of the Echuca School probably lie in the extensive traffic that formerly passed up and down the river. Financial markets obey much the same rhythms as the rise and fall of the pennies; with bullish and bearish moods, booms, busts and bubbles. They are both predictable and risky — and incredibly sensitive. The Stock Exchange is easily spooked.

Like most marketplaces, swy enjoys a form of regulation, albeit crude, by policemen armed with sledgehammers. And the operator takes his percentage of the winnings. Much is made of the elements of security and trust present in market transactions, rightly so. Yet there is also risk. More, there are intangibles, not easily translated into textbook language. The point at which venture becomes gambling is not easy to establish. Michael Oakeshott made the distinction between cookery books and cooking; the rules of cricket and playing the game. Swy, then, belongs to the imagination of every-day market life, mirroring a neighbouring world of busy exchange and drawing inspiration from it. There is no reason to suppose that it will cease to be played in its old haunts, so long as there are men willing to stake their luck and give the coins a spin.

S. P. Kenaelly is a private scholar.