

ALISON VINCENT

Richard Beckett and Sam Orr talk about food.

ABSTRACT

Richard Beckett (1936 – 1987) has been described as ‘a sophisticated larrikin of the old school’ (Walsh 1993: 19). In the persona of Sam Orr he wrote ‘pungently opinionated’ (Walsh 1993: 19) restaurant reviews for the outspoken and iconoclastic journal Nation Review, in a prose style described as ‘contemporary trendy obscene’ (Halligan 1977:18). There was much more, however, to Richard Beckett than the larger-than-life Sam Orr. He was one of the Australia’s most prolific food writers of the 1970s and 1980s, publishing widely on food matters, from restaurant guides, a history of food in Australia and books on gardening and growing food, and always concerned with what Australians ate and their relationship with food production and supply. Today his work is largely forgotten and his contribution barely recognized. This paper explores Beckett’s contribution to food writing in Australia and in particular his role as a restaurant critic.

KEYWORDS

restaurant reviews
food writing
Richard Beckett
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RICHARD BECKETT AND SAM ORR TALK ABOUT FOOD

Richard Beckett was born in 1936 and grew up in Sydney. Once he had finished his education and completed a journalism cadetship, he departed on what he called the ‘obligatory Grand Tour of Europe’ in the late 1950s (Beckett 1979b: 16). His career as a journalist subsequently took him to Canada, Port Moresby, Hong Kong, London, Vietnam (as a war correspondent), and East Africa, along the way giving him the opportunity to broaden his knowledge of food and his experience of cooking (Childs 1987, Walsh 1993: 19).

Back in Australia in 1970, Beckett was recruited as sub-editor of the *Sunday Review*, which subsequently became *Nation Review*, an independently owned, weekly publication based in Melbourne and distributed nationally.¹ *Nation Review* was very much a product of the times. Owned by the idealistic and wealthy businessman, Gordon Barton, who also founded the Australia Party, as an alternative for Liberal supporters who were opposed to the

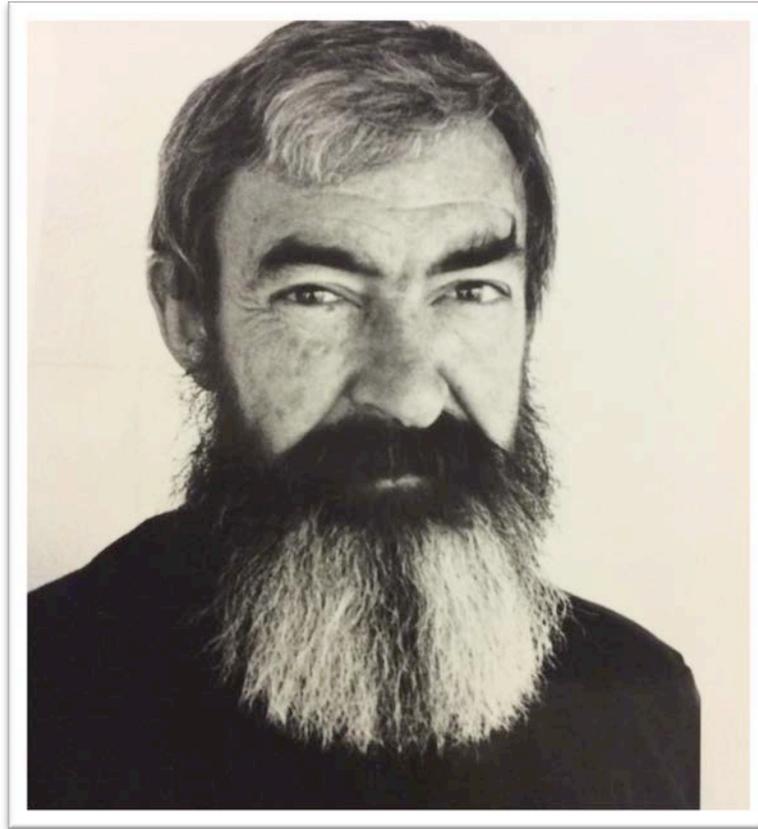


Figure 1: Richard Beckett (Papers and Publications of Richard Beckett 1951 – 1990, MS 7355, National Library of Australia).

Vietnam War, the paper was aimed at people interested in the serious discussion of social and political reform (MacCallum 2005). Born in a mood of optimism, *Nation Review* took on the task of burying once and for all the post-war conservatism of the Menzies years and championing the promise offered by a change of government, along with feminism, gay rights and the emerging green politics (MacCallum 1993). The nickname and symbol of the newspaper became the ferret since, like a ferret, *Nation Review* was ‘lean and nosy’ and under its founding editor, Richard Walsh, ‘The Ferret’ became ‘a larrikin and scurrilous voice for iconoclasm’ (MacCallum 2005).

In addition to his other responsibilities as sub-editor, from March 1971 Beckett was appointed the journal’s restaurant critic, and for this role he took on the guise of Sam Orr. Beckett’s initial ‘Tucker’ column appeared on Sunday 21 March 1971 and was one of the very first weekly columns in Australian newspapers exclusively dedicated to reviews of restaurants. Eric Page had begun his ‘Let’s Eat’ in *The Herald* (Melbourne) twelve months earlier (Page 1970) and Leo Schofield, who would go on to be Australia’s best known

restaurant critic, would not begin his column in the *Sunday Australian* until May 1971 (Schofield 1971).

The fictitious Sam Orr was tailor-made to fit the ethos of *Nation Review*. He was a comic character, opinionated, iconoclastic, deliberately unconventional and out spoken. He was also deliberately constructed as a foil to the other more gentlemanly and well-connected critics and food columnists of the time, and the personalities cultivated by Page and Schofield, and the likes of Ted Moloney and Johnny Walker, who had been fixtures in the Sydney press, writing about wine, food and restaurant dining since the mid-1960s. Where these men portray themselves as urbane and sophisticated, Sam Orr is uncouth, loud, drunken and rude. His behavior is outrageous, drunkenness and sexual innuendo are perennial themes, and his language at the very least is colourful – blasphemous, sometimes obscene, and often confronting. Angry and argumentative, he is also cynical and skeptical.



Figure 2: Sam Orr going out to dinner, *Nation Review* 1 – 7 April 1972.



Figure 3: Sam Orr à table, *Nation Review* 8 – 14 April 1972

From the beginning, according to Walsh (1993:19), Sam Orr's reviews were intended to be 'pungently opinionated' and Walsh further claims that, over time, Sam Orr became one of *Nation Review's* best-loved characters, his 'rumbustious persona' being even more clearly defined by the illustrations that Michael Leunig produced to accompany his critiques.

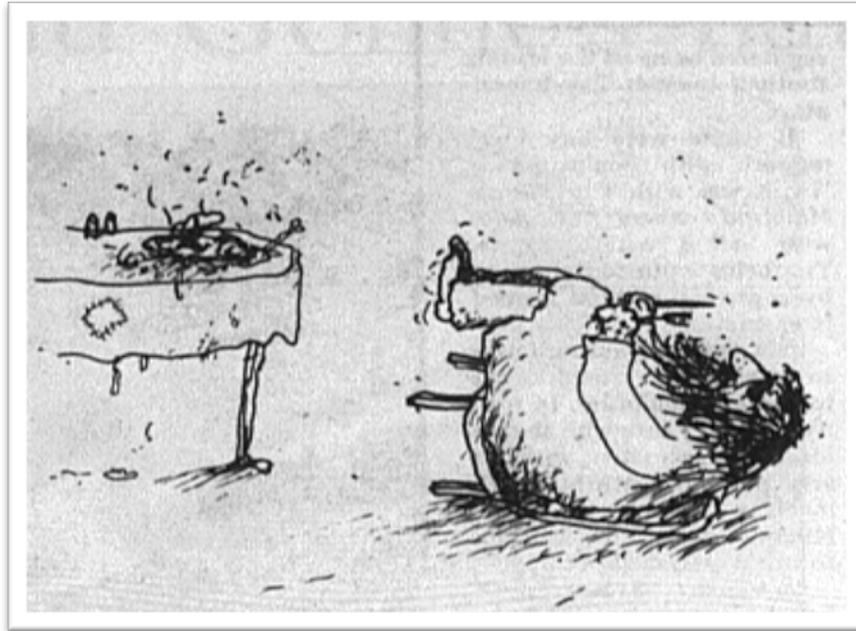


Figure 4: *Nation Review* 17 – 23 September 1976.

Beckett's reviews always told a story and invariably involved details of his personal life and his tempestuous personal relationships. Indeed once Sam Orr was established, the 'Tucker' column became more like an on-going saga of Beckett's life in the inner city including stories such as his encounters with the aggressive trio of fox terriers, 'the fiends of Hell', Spot, Susan and Rexie, who lived next door, than an in-depth review of the food he has eaten or an overt attempt to educate his audience about styles of food and appropriate restaurant behaviour.

Sam's adventures were often hilarious and always enlivened by Beckett's wicked sarcasm. Whilst they no doubt provided *Nation Review* readers with regular entertainment, it would be wrong to dismiss Sam Orr as merely an amusing aberration. Beckett had a serious message to convey and, from his very first review, many of Sam Orr's preoccupations were evident. He believed that if a restaurant claimed to be ethnic it should strive for a degree of authenticity. He disliked what he called 'bastard Italian restaurants' (Beckett 1971b) and so-called French provincial food. Vegetables were a frequent cause for complaint. Sam Orr

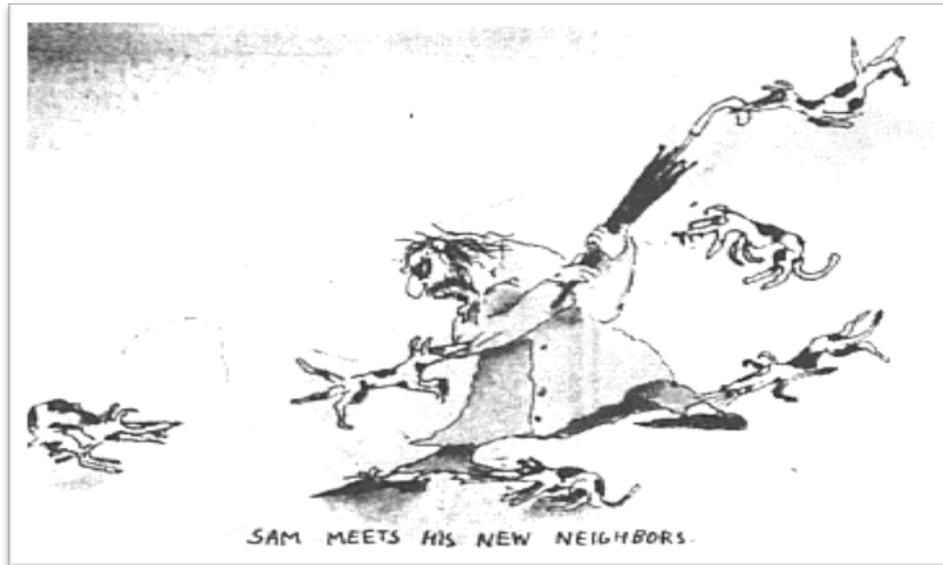


Figure 5: *Nation Review* 17 – 23 September 1976.

regularly bemoaned the lack of fresh vegetables in restaurants, the want of any choice in the vegetables offered, and the way they were served. He wanted his vegetables served separately and cooked properly. Most of all he demanded fresh food, nothing canned or frozen and no packet mixes. He also had a particular dislike of dishes served with sauces whose flavour and texture reminded him of ‘billstickers paste’ (for example, Beckett 1973). He had no time for badly prepared food or food that did not live up to what was suggested on the menu. He ranted against lousy bread, foil encased butter, bad coffee, excessive corkage, loading the bill with unwanted extras and ‘dreadful’ garlic bread (Beckett 1972e).

Above all else, Sam Orr had an abhorrence of pretension, as evidenced by the restaurant itself or its patrons, or indeed other restaurant critics. He had no time for insulting and unprofessional waiters and restaurants that charged high prices and suffered from ‘overweening pride’ (Beckett 1972e). He disliked the ‘food pseuds’ and ‘gracious liveries’ (Beckett 1972e), and the beautiful people who inhabited the ‘second rate sleazy provincial upper crust world of tattered Sydney’ (Beckett 1972b). Where others saw gourmets, Sam Orr saw ‘posing bastards’ (Beckett 1980b: 84). With reference to other critics, he made his position clear :

If there is one thing that craps me off in restaurant writing it is the name-dropping approach where the writer sets himself off from the common herd. (Beckett 1971c)

Through Sam Orr, Beckett set out to demonstrate that it was possible to dine in restaurants and drink fancy wine without having to be one of the cultured classes and that good taste was

not something confined to the moneyed or genteel. His overriding philosophy is perhaps best summed up by this quote,

a Sargent's pie, a beer and a root is no less stimulating than *perdieu à la forestiere*, a bottle of Moët and Chandon and a little fornication. It's all relative. (Beckett 1972d)

Beckett wanted his readers to appreciate that a good restaurant was distinguished by the care and attention given to the food that was served. Fancy names and glamorous surroundings neither guaranteed a good meal nor compensated for a bad one.

Beckett did not limit himself, or Sam Orr, solely to restaurant critiques, rather he used his column as a platform to voice his opinions on a wide range of food related issues. It is this interest in the wider food scene and his curiosity about all aspects of the changes in Australian eating habits that also sets him apart from other restaurant critics of the time. Whilst he was perfectly capable of appreciating the best in restaurant food, nostalgia was a regular theme in his writing. He saw in the rise of the trendy restaurant frequented by the beautiful people and the decline of the old time cafes, which served tea, braised chops, sausages and oyster soup, the loss of something quintessentially Australian. He laments the loss of an honesty and simplicity in food. He rails against the Americanization of food and the increasing reliance on processed foods. He advocates the importance of home cooking, the use of local ingredients and frequently extolls the abundance and excellent quality of Australian raw materials. He argues for better food in school canteens and decries food fads and fad diets and spurious dietary advice.

Over the seven years (1971-78) of writing for *Nation Review*, Beckett, as Sam Orr, contributed around 300 reviews and articles, ranging from a few hundred words to full tabloid pages. How influential his reviews may have been is extremely difficult to estimate. It is perhaps no surprise that Sam was not a universally popular figure. One commentator complained that he provided very little information at all about food or restaurants, and described his prose style as 'contemporary trendy obscene' (Halligan 1977: 18). Others thought he was irresponsible (Singleton 1973), or disagreed with his remarks (Raiche 1973) or were disappointed by his recommendations (Paithorpe 1973, Child n.d.), and some just found him boring (Young-Eckersley 1976, Lawings 1975). However, Sam Orr did have his fans and correspondence from his readers suggests that many appreciated his sense of

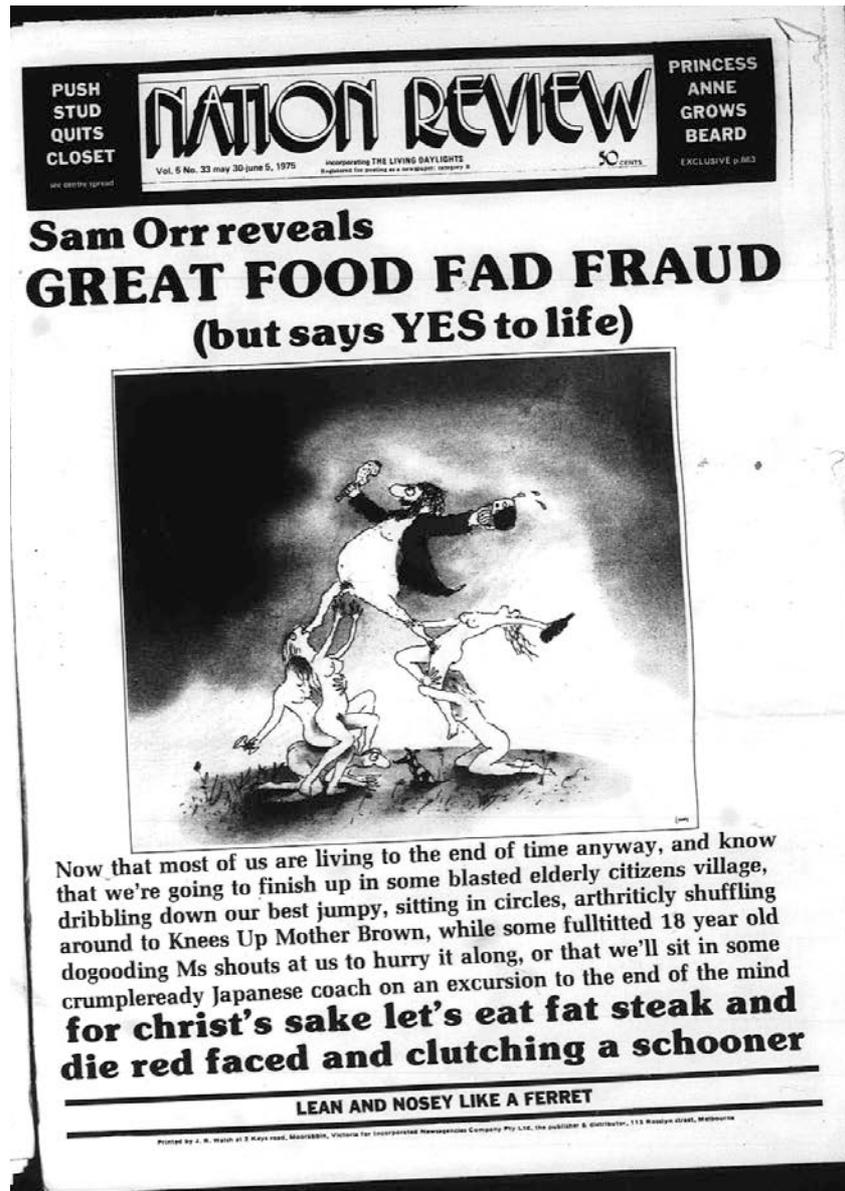


Figure 6: The only time Sam Orr appears on the cover, *Nation Review* May 30–June 5, 1975.

applauded and welcomed his honesty and forthright approach (for example O'Connor 1975, Raymond 1972, Sadler 1976) and respected his judgment (Watson, 1973). Many readers saw him as their friend and spokesman, in one case addressing their letter 'Hullo Good Sam Dear Brother in Food' (Gorman & Piggott 1975). For some Beckett's column was their main reason for buying that paper and the first thing they read (for example Gorman & Piggott 1975, Newman n.d.).

After Beckett left *Nation Review* his restaurant critiques appeared briefly in the *Sun Herald* (NSW) and the *National Times*. Still opinionated, these reviews are more sober, in every sense of the word, in keeping with the style of these newspapers. These publications allowed Beckett to display his knowledge and present his views to a much wider audience.

Nation Review appealed to a limited readership and at its best had only a circulation of around 30,000 (Walsh 1993:77), whereas the *Sun Herald* for example had circulation figures in excess of 600,000 (Audit Bureau of Circulations). He further consolidated his position as a commentator on the restaurant scene with the publication of restaurant guides to both Sydney and Melbourne (Beckett 1977, 1979a, 1980a; Orr, Smark and Latrielle 1980). Subsequently he also published *Roll on brave new bloody world* (Beckett 1980b), a personal selection of pieces attributed to Sam Orr that had previously appeared in *Nation Review*.

Briefly, in the mid-1970s, Beckett and his wife of the time dabbled in the country life, with a hobby farm at Wingello, in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. This move prompted a series of articles for *Nation Review* on the trials and the joys of a rural existence and together they published a book, *The Gourmet's Garden* (Beckett 1975), that offers gardening advice and recipes, and is dedicated 'to all those who regard frozen peas and crinkle-cut carrots as two of the worst inventions of the twentieth century'. It may have surprised both his fans and his detractors, but Beckett was a competent and knowledgeable gardener and, as his friends could attest, a good cook.

Once *Nation Review* and Sam Orr were behind him, this other side of Richard Beckett came to the fore, beginning in 1980 with the publication of *Surviving in the Eighties*, co-written with Michael Boddy, friend, fellow food columnist and farmer (Boddy & Beckett 1980). In his half of the book Beckett writes about his experiences on the Wingello property and the garden he created at his inner city terrace, providing information on everything from garden design and gardening equipment to preservation techniques and instructions on soap making. Then late in 1980, with his new partner, Beckett left the city for good and moved to Molong, in the central west of New South Wales. From now on his journalism, regular columns in the monthly magazine *Australian Gourmet*, and in the Good Living section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* each week, focused on the discussion of a range of matters concerned with living in the country. He also wrote two further books with recipes and advice about growing food and cooking it: *Home Grown* (Beckett 1983) and *Country Grown* (Beckett 1987). Gardening and cooking were topics that Beckett was clearly passionate about and his articles and books dealing with how to grow food plants and what to do with the produce are written with enthusiasm, wit, and authority, offering sound, practical advice drawn from his own experience and extensive research.

Aside from books on Australian wine and wineries, Beckett made two other significant contributions to Australian food literature. The first of these, *Richard Beckett alias*

Sam Orr talks about food (Beckett 1979b) is a slim volume, only a total of 48 pages, which hardly ranks as a comprehensive autobiography. Nonetheless it does provide autobiographical reflection and detail about Beckett's life and his inspirations that is not available in other published sources. This text is also important as one of the precious few culinary biographies/autobiographies and/or published reminiscences of figures who have been influential on the food and restaurant scene in Australia.

Beckett's most outstanding work is his book *Convicted Tastes* (Beckett 1984) in which he brings together all the concerns which raised in his food journalism and incorporates them into his own idiosyncratic history of Australian eating. Like all Beckett's writing, this work is a testament to his curiosity and breadth of knowledge but *Convicted Tastes* has always stood in the shadow of Michael Symons's *One Continuous Picnic: a history of eating in Australia* (Symons 1982) published two years earlier. Although clearly Beckett's research was begun, and many of his ideas had appeared in print, long before *One Continuous Picnic* was published, inevitably both books cover similar ground and share similar concerns. Whereas Symons presents evidence to support a cogent argument about the development of Australian tastes, by comparison Beckett's work lacks both purpose and logical structure. Sadly *Convicted Tastes* also lacks the bibliography and footnotes that would do justice to the extensive scope of Beckett's research and would make this text an invaluable resource for students of Australian food culture. However, for all its faults, *Convicted Tastes* makes for informative reading and its significance should not be discounted. For many years Beckett's and Symons' works were the only resources which addressed the history of food in Australia and *Convicted Tastes* remains one of very few publications which present any other approach to the topic than that espoused in *One Continuous Picnic*.

Richard Beckett died in September 1987, aged only 51, from the consequences of a lifetime of heavy smoking and excessive alcohol consumption. At his funeral, his long-time friend and colleague, John Hepworth, referred to him as 'a miraculous monster', and described Beckett as a person of 'infinite curiosity and implacable integrity'. He also added that 'he could be wise, wonderfully witty, graciously scabrous, utterly beguiling – and absolutely awful' (Hepworth n.d.). The outrageous exploits of Sam Orr are not only a highly original contribution to the genre of restaurant criticism, they are also a chronicle of the behavior which cost Beckett his closest personal relationships and along the way probably also denied him the respect among other food writers that he deserved. Despite being, to my knowledge, the only Australian food writer whose work appears in both anthologies of Australian creative writing (Moorhouse 1973, Anderson 1986) and gastronomic writing

(Santich 2000, Davidson 1988), today Beckett's books are out of print and his journalism is largely remembered only by those who look back with fondness to the heady days of *Nation Review*. It is, of course, idle to speculate on what further contributions Richard Beckett may have made to the cannon of Australian food writing, but it is not too late make a greater effort to recognize, assess, and perhaps even celebrate, his substantial and varied legacy.

NOTE

¹ Barton's *Sunday Review*, first published 11 October 1970, changed its name to *Review* in 1971 (16 July) and finally became *Nation Review*, first published 29 July 1972, after merger with *Nation*, an independent journal which had been in publication since 1958. To avoid confusion, all references to articles published in either *Sunday Review*, *Review* or *Nation Review* will be referred to as *Nation Review*.

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