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Oxford Word of the Month – January: Australian tea

noun: a social fundraising event that usually includes the sale and purchase of donated items.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

In 1915, the newspaper *Nhill Free Press* gave notice of a social event soon to take place:

On Thursday, July 29th, a function to be called an ‘Australian Tea’ will be held in the Mechanics’ Hall, Kaniva. All ladies will be expected to bring and to buy one or more gifts, also to provide afternoon tea, the gifts to consist of articles of home produce, such as jams, pickles, eggs, butter, vegetables, fruits, poultry, etc. On account of it being a special effort, gentlemen will be charged one shilling for afternoon tea. (29 June)

From the time of the First World War through to the 1950s, the term **Australian tea**, along with the variants *American tea* (also an Australian term, first recorded in 1910, and still used) and *American afternoon* (first recorded in 1912), were used to refer to a fundraising event involving the sale and purchase of donated items.

The origin of **Australian tea** is probably a patriotic wartime variant of *American tea*. The following quote clearly suggests that the *American tea* was a new type of fundraiser, with a slightly different way of raising money to the later ‘bring a gift, buy a gift’ style of event:

It seems almost impossible nowadays to think of new ways of raising money for one’s pet charity, but the latest is the ‘American Tea.’ The collector for the charity gives notice to her friends that some time in the future she is having an American tea in aid of a certain object, then she will give a prize to the guest who, in the opinion of the other guests, has raised her contribution in the most ingenious way. (Maitland Daily Mercury, 28 May 1910)

Both *American tea* and **Australian tea**—the terms and the events—were familiar to many Australians by the 1920s:

*The most recent was an **Australian tea** last Saturday, on the lines of an American tea, to which guests were asked to bring a gift, the proceeds of which were to be used to help local charities. (Table Talk, 10 March 1927)*

Australian teas continued to be held through the first half of the twentieth century, but became less common after this. There is still evidence of the events being held, however, but *American tea* appears to be the preferred term, as suggested by this description of a Tasmanian woman's fundraising activities: 'Baking for her famed *American tea* fundraiser begins weeks before the event and her freezer is filled to bursting with a delicious array of cakes.' (Hobart *Mercury*, 26 July 2007)

Australian tea and *American tea* are both included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* (forthcoming 2016).

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