

BOOK REVIEWS

Heron, Craig. 2003. *Booze: A Distilled History*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 497 pages, incl. illustrations.

There is an often told story in my family that recounts the day many years ago when my grandmother greeted my grandfather with a kiss as he returned from the summer hayfields. Smelling 'ale' on his breath, she immediately sank into a chair by the doorway where she sat for several minutes in angry, silent protest. Raised in a protestant, resolutely temperance household, my grandmother had little (or no) tolerance for even a drink of a single pint on a hot summer day.

I remember the difficulty I had understanding how my grandmother's views on alcohol could be so different from the more 'contemporary' practices of my parents who seemed to be normal social drinkers. Fortunately, Craig Heron's recent work, *Booze: a Distilled History*, uncovers the contradictory and diverse relationships people in Canada have had with alcohol over the last four centuries. The book is an extremely readable account that provides a far-reaching social history of alcohol while contributing to a broader working-class history project. Heron is part of a generation of social historians in Canada that expanded historical research to include the everyday lives of people who were not Prime Ministers, generals or business elites. *Booze* continues this tradition as the multiple and contested relationships involving the 'elusive John Barleycorn' are explored within a strong class identity framework.

Much of Heron's work focuses on the century long battle between 'wet' and 'dry' voices in Canada over the regulation of alcohol. *Booze* unfolds over eleven chapters with a logical chronology, but avoids insisting upon discreet periods separated by dates of imaginary importance. This structure allows the author to revisit social practices and movements such as temperance that rise and fall repeatedly over time. The story begins with the early colonial history of alcohol, 'the water of life' (chapter two), and its importance as a dietary staple for settlers, exchange good, and centre of mostly male social relationships. In pre-industrial Canada, drunkenness, while not uncommon, was hardly a looming social concern. Drinking only became a social problem during the colony's transition to an industrial economy in the 19th century (chapter three). Here, debates over alcohol consumption began to implicate male working-class

culture, specifically the ability of the working man to provide for his family given the temptations of the tavern.

Heron thoroughly documents the contest between those who wished to regulate consumption and a rapidly modernizing distilling and brewing industry seeking to mass market its products to working-class homes and watering holes (chapter four). In the second half of the 19th century, temperance forces had exerted enough pressure on governments that any public drunkenness became a punishable offence, and distribution to Aboriginal peoples was banned (chapter five).

Heron balances his account of the successes of bourgeois and racist temperance movements with that of the resistant 'wet voices' (chapter six). Prohibition spread rapidly, although unevenly, throughout Canada in an increasing number of dry communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Movements advocating the moderate consumption of alcohol provided an alternative to the prohibitionists. More importantly, these voices defended what was possibly a guised attack on working-class, immigrant and non-white cultures.

Prohibition is revealed as a 'farce' as booze largely flowed freely within and beyond Canadian borders making bootleggers rich while only moderately decreasing consumption as prices increased for working people (chapter seven). Several lessons from this period are likely applicable to today's marijuana prohibition.

The failure of prohibition in the 1920s launched an era of government involvement in the regulation and distribution of alcohol (chapter eight). Taverns, traditional male working-class social spaces, were increasingly regulated and the government owned 'liquor store' was born. Following the Second World War, alcohol slowly became a more widely accepted consumer good (except for First Nations still under the colonial gaze). Industry consolidation and mass marketing combined with acceptable government regulation and widespread social liberation allowed mainstream consumption to flourish (chapter nine).

During the same period, however, the pathology of excessive drinking became less a social problem and increasingly individualized. Heron documents the shift in the sympathetic treatment of alcoholism to individual choices and personality traits, rather than on alcohol itself (chapter ten). The recent experience in Canada suggests that collective responses to regulating alcohol (i.e., outright prohibition, decreasing availability) have been replaced by those strategies emphasizing individual responsibility.

Booze is social history at its finest. The social significance of drinking, a cultural, economic, and political everyday practice, is effortlessly revealed. As historical research, Heron weaves multiple primary and secondary sources together seamlessly. The notes, references and index consume over 100 pages.

The extensive archival photographs and pictures with detailed captions enhancing the reading experience are an added delight.

There are, of course, themes and topics which Heron could have developed further in the book. *Booze* uses largely a masculinist, white working-class framework for analysis. Heron skilfully links alcohol consumption practices to the production of whiteness and masculine working-class identities and gender relations (often through exclusionary practices). More detail is needed, however, on undeveloped themes such as women's participation in 19th century temperance movements and its role in shaping early feminism in Canada. Further, while Heron repeatedly notes the attitudes whites held toward the perceived drinking practices of 'others', less detail is given regarding the actual drinking habits of marginalized groups. For example, what role did alcohol play in Montreal's jazz clubs frequented by black patrons? Similarly, booze has been an important part of queer spaces this century. Yet, 'John Barleycorn's' specific role in the formation of queer social spaces and identities is not widely discussed. These shortcomings are less criticisms of Heron's comprehensive study than suggested areas for future research to build on the author's work.

Overall, *Booze* tells a thoughtful story of the changing views of alcohol in Canada. Heron explains the processes that change social practices. And while my grandmother has yet to take a drink, her temperance position has moderated over the years. After reading *Booze*, I better understand where her views came from and also why they may have changed.

Steven Tufts
Department of Geography,
Trent University,
Peterborough, Canada