

Alcohol in World History

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Reviewer: James Nicholls

In the conclusion to *Alcohol in World History*, Gina Hames observes that the influence of alcohol has been ‘omnipresent in human history’ (p. 134). It is undoubtedly the case that, while not the dominant psychoactive substance in all human cultures, alcohol has played a more pervasive and significant role in the history of human thought, ritual and economy than any other drug. Its critical function in the development of European and Near-Eastern cultures is well known – from the symbolic place of wine in Christian sacrament, to the symposia of Classical Greece and the centrality of viticulture in the spread of Greek and Roman trade. Less well recognised (though usefully highlighted in the early chapters of Hames’ book) is the role of alcohol in the early Chinese civilisation, as well as its importance to many pre-colonial cultures in Meso and South America. Even the absence of alcohol is a gesture of cultural identity: the prohibition of alcohol in Islam was, to some degree, a means of embedding cultural distinction into the heart of everyday Muslim practice.

In the modern world, the consumption of alcohol has become more pervasive, and the means by which it can be consumed have diversified (most critically with the development of industrial-scale distillation from the 18th century). As David T. Courtwright has shown, alcohol was one of the ‘big three’ psychoactive resources, along with tobacco and caffeine, which helped drive the globalisation of trade from the 17th century onwards.⁽¹⁾ Today, the global alcohol industry continues to expand in developing countries even as the key players (Diageo, SABMiller and others) seek to consolidate their share in the almost-saturated markets of Europe and North America. Drinking is an increasingly globalised cultural practice, and alcohol is, without doubt, a substance with a global history.

The sheer scale, depth and diversity of alcohol's role in human societies makes any attempt to survey that history a monumental challenge. Gina Hames is to be applauded for her ambition in seeking to construct a coherent map through this daunting scope of human activity, and to do so in less than 150 pages. Of course, no such survey is going to be comprehensive – and to expect anything more than a broad guide would be unreasonable in a book of this kind. Rather, the purpose of a book such as this (part of an edited series on 'themes in world history' which includes other weighty subjects like 'science', 'religion', 'sports' and 'warfare') is surely to give the reader a sense of the overarching problems, trends and developments that can be seen when taking a wide-angle perspective.

Hames approaches her subject matter chronologically and by region. Early chapters cover broad historical eras (the classical period; the post-classical and early modern world) with the later chapters focussing on the period from 1900 to the present. Within each chapter, subsections cover a range of different geographies: North America, Great Britain, France, Japan, India and so forth depending on the material discussed. The bulk of the work covers North, Meso and South America, Africa, and Europe (mainly Britain, France and Russia); however, shorter sections on China, India, Australia and, in one chapter, Saudi Arabia broaden the scope. By necessity, many of these subsections only give brief snapshots ('Post-classical and early-modern Japan', for instance, is a single paragraph), and most subsections are a few pages in length: enough to give an outline of key themes, but without space for detailed analysis. As the book covers early human history to the present day, it is highly selective as regards what areas, and which periods, receive attention. This is not inherently a problem, though it inevitably raises questions about what has been included and what has been left out (there is nothing, for example, on Scandinavia, though it played a key role in the development of state-centred and public health-oriented control policies in the 19th and 20th centuries).

Throughout the book, Hames aims to draw out overarching principles, and does this well. Her concluding arguments dwell on the extent to which alcohol consumption is never simply an issue of either refreshment or intoxication (a term which is, itself, freighted with cultural meaning). Rather, drinking is a cultural practice and, as such, is inextricably tied to social relations: to the power dynamics of class, gender, and ethnic and religious difference. Hames is especially strong when describing the role of alcohol in European colonisation – arguing that 'the production, trade, consumption, and regulation of alcohol fostered European success in world trade [and] helped solidify the new colonial identities of both the colonists and the indigenous' (p. 60).

Drinking is a performance as much as a means of ingestion, and its rituals provide marks of cultural distinction. Even one's behaviour when drunk – as MacAndrew and Edgerton famously demonstrated in *Drunken Comportment* – reflects social learning and mores of the social milieu.⁽²⁾ Alcohol is also, crucially, a commodity – though, as contemporary public health advocates insist, 'no ordinary' one.⁽³⁾ As such it is a medium and expression of economic power, a substance that is traded, regulated, exchanged, marketed and so forth. Hames emphasises these realities throughout her study, and demonstrates clearly that they hold wherever alcohol is consumed: whether that be 21st-century America or Ming Dynasty China.

Such observations are important: they remind us that alcohol cannot be abstracted from culture – that drinking *is* culture, in a sense. By applying this to a global, and very long historical, perspective *Alcohol in World History* reinforces a critical truth.

Nevertheless, the inescapable compression and concision required to set out a 'world history' perspective in such a brief space creates difficulties. Alcohol history is a rich and diverse field of research, but Hames seems to have made sparse use of many resources which could have aided her enterprise. Some key studies in the field (Warner on the Gin Craze, Harrison on British Temperance, Rorabaugh on Colonial America for instance ⁽⁴⁾) do not appear to have been used, and had more of the wealth of literature on addiction history, public health and the global alcohol trade informed Hames' analysis, it would have greatly strengthened the work.

The appearance of a wide, but not deep, research base for the book is not aided by the decision (presumably editorial) to forgo standard academic referencing throughout. Very occasionally direct quotes are attributed, but otherwise there are no footnotes or in-text citations, leaving the reader to try and piece together the source material from brief 'Further reading' lists provided at the end of chapters. This is, on one level, merely distracting; on another level it undermines the authority of the book as a whole. The reader has no way of knowing the provenance of either historical claims or data, so cannot attempt to work out which may be reliable, and which – so common in the history of alcohol – are stories retold and reworked until they bear only a faintest similarity to actual events.

The depiction of Victorian temperance here is illustrative. Hames presents us with a Victorian temperance movement that is broadly middle class, overwhelmingly Protestant and mostly socially conservative. That is, no doubt, the impression that has filtered down through the general histories of the period, and it contains some truth. However it underplays the fundamental radicalism that defined much of temperance movement; the liberatory politics that found expression in many of the total abstention movements; the dramatic scale of nationalist, Catholic temperance in Ireland (Father Matthew's famous 'Temperance Crusade' is not discussed in the sections on Ireland); or the rise of socialist temperance and its influence on early 20th-century alcohol regulation. Furthermore, Hames (perhaps unwittingly) accepts an elite Victorian narrative about alcohol: that problem drinking was, in most instances, a working-class issue or a problem of marginalised social groups. Unlike many in the Victorian temperance movement, Hames does little to question this version of events, even while convincingly arguing that alcohol regulation has often acted as a tool of elite social control.

There are, unfortunately, some infelicities in the sections on British and American drinking in the modern era. While the 1703 Methuen Treaty (critical in popularising port in Georgian Britain) is only briefly alluded to, a law of 1728 supposedly banning bottled wine (there was no such edict) is given prominence. There is no mention of the Washingtonian temperance movement in America, or the 1853 Maine Law – and subsequent spread of prohibition across a number of states in the following decade. We are also told absinthe was banned by the British Defence of the Realm Act in 1915 (it was, in fact, banned in France not the UK), and that habitual drinking was only construed as a disease from the late 19th century – despite a significant body of research demonstrating that this process began much earlier.

Some of the claims made regarding recent trends also raised questions. A causal link between total consumption and violence is made without reference to the extensive literature on the complex relationship between alcohol, violence and other mediating factors (not least bar design and outlet density); we are told that spirits consumption in the United States has risen by 60 per cent compared to 2005 – but not how that striking figure relates to overall consumption trends. On p. 113 we are given two 'wildly different' estimates for changes in Russian consumption in the second half of the 20th century, but again no help in deciding which source might bring us closer to the truth.

No book is perfect, and it is undoubtedly in the nature of this survey that the existing research base will be compressed. However, the occasionally anecdotal approach in passages on subjects in which I have an interest (not to mention the no-referencing policy) somewhat shook my confidence in the reliability of the sections covering material about which I knew little or nothing.

However, Hames seems on firmer ground when describing the drinking cultures and rituals of South and Central America – and these chapters provide an intriguing introduction to the world of *chicha* rituals and *pulque* production. They also, as is the case throughout the book, highlight the paradoxical politics of alcohol regulation – in which the desire for social control comes up hard against the need to maximise tax revenues. Similarly, the section on 20th-century Russian drinking gives a clear sense of both the scale of alcohol problems in Russia, and the way in which periodic state interventions have tried (and, largely, failed) to address this. Sections on classical China and contemporary Saudi Arabia gave some fascinating insights into areas that it is likely many readers will know very little about. Indeed, Hames contributes well to

dispelling the strikingly Eurocentric perception that alcohol use was rare – even widely unknown – in South East Asia (not to mention South America) prior to the spread of European trade.

Readers coming at this book with a general interest will, therefore, find much that is of use, and will undoubtedly come away thinking about alcohol as a mediator of social distinction and power. This, in my view, is a very good thing. By contrast, specialist readers and researchers may find less to get their teeth into. This is an ambitious book, clearly produced within restrictive editorial limits, and it doesn't always achieve its goals. Nevertheless, it should provide a good springboard for readers entering this complex and fascinating area.

Notes

1. D. C. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. MacAndrew and R. Edgerton, *Drunken Comportment: A Social Explanation* (Chicago, IL, 1969).
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity: Research and Policy*, ed. T. Babor et al. (Oxford, 2010).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason* (London, 2003); B. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians*, (2nd ed., Keele, 1998); W. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York, NY, 1981).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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