

## Prohibition Review Article

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**Reviewer:** William Haydock

Alcohol policy never ceases to be controversial. In the last 12 months the UK coalition government has retreated from the unequivocal claim of the 2012 Alcohol Strategy that ‘we will introduce a minimum unit price for alcohol’, amid claims in the *British Medical Journal* that the government engaged only in a ‘sham’ consultation, with the outcome never in doubt as policy is ‘under the influence’ of the alcohol industry.<sup>(1)</sup>

This debate has strong historical resonances, and makes the publication of Robert Duncan’s account of what he refers to as ‘the drink crisis’ of the First World War particularly timely, (almost) one hundred years on. The war saw the creation of the Central Control Board (CCB) to, in Duncan’s words, ‘oversee a radical overhaul of drink provision throughout Britain and ensure that national efficiency was not threatened by the continued popularity of the pint or whisky chaser’ (p.2).

The CCB was part of a broader scheme of licensing reform that one social historian has referred to as ‘perhaps the most tangible long-term legacy of the First World War’.<sup>(2)</sup> This went as far as the municipal ownership and management of pubs in Carlisle, to deal with what was seen as a hotspot of drunkenness with particular strategic importance given the nearby munitions factories.

At times, *Pubs and Patriots* reads like a polemic, and the case study of Carlisle illustrates Duncan’s key target: the assumption behind regulation of alcohol that drunkenness was affecting productivity and thus harming the war effort. He argues that this was the result of ‘a fundamental misreading of normal working class social habits’ (p. 12), which were not the root cause of problems with the prosecution of the war.

Dan Malleck's book, *Try to Control Yourself*, also concerns itself with a Control Board overseeing the sale of alcohol – in this case the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO), introduced to manage the licensing of premises in the Canadian province when prohibition was repealed in 1927.

The two books take quite different approaches, rooted in their epistemological and methodological divergences. Duncan states that his aim is to demonstrate that 'social anxieties, rather than factual certainties, dictated attitudes to drinking in Britain during the war' (p. 8). Malleck, by contrast, takes a discursive approach informed by the concepts of bureaucratization, governmentality and biopower, borrowed from Weber and Foucault. Malleck's aim is to analyse how the LCBO envisaged an ideal 'citizen-drinker', and to understand how this was fostered at a local level. Thus, he is perhaps less concerned with the 'factual certainty' of, for example, drinking activities of the working class, than how the ideas about them shaped the regulation of drinking both in theory and practice.

With such differences in theoretical perspective – an emphasis on facts versus discourse – it might be surprising that it is Malleck's work that is defined by its meticulous and clearly articulated archive research. Malleck selected six case study locations in Ontario to represent geographic and demographic diversity, and thus was able to analyse all the available LCBO archive files for these areas. The book is therefore not so much peppered as imbued with accounts from specific inspectors, licensees or complainants regarding public drinking at the time. Malleck works on the principle that 'Understanding the processes of regulation is essential to understanding the operations of the LCBO' (p. 35).

*Try to Control Yourself* is structured largely thematically, with the exception of two chapters that bookend the main empirical element of the book, after the introduction has crucially outlined the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study and the first chapter proper has introduced the broad mechanisms of regulation. The themes covered are: the design and shape of drinking venues; the role of local communities in the regulation process, for example in writing letters to the Board to complain about venues; the role of political patronage in shaping licensing decisions; recreation in drinking spaces (particularly music and dancing); the position of women and children in relation to licensed premises; and how the LCBO dealt with issues of race, ethnicity and nationality.

The first of the chronological bookend chapters covers a particularly interesting episode, from 1927 to 1934. In this period, the public drinking of anything stronger than 'light beer' (around 2.2 per cent ABV) remained illegal, though hotels, which had been the main sites for public drinking prior to prohibition in 1916, were able to sell regular-strength beer to residents to drink in their own rooms. From 1934 the LCBO came into its own, and the bulk of the book concerns itself with the period from this point to the outbreak of the Second World War, with wartime regulation being the focus of the second bookending chapter, before the book closes with a brief five-page conclusion reflecting on life after 1944, which saw the demise of the LCBO, the main themes of the book, and their relevance to drinking practices and alcohol policy today.

Malleck suggests that the LCBO had 'a seemingly impenetrable opacity', meaning it 'moved in mysterious ways, and therein lay its power' (p. 32). The focus of the book is less on whether the LCBO was technically effective in making people 'control' themselves, as much as trying to reveal the processes of the bureaucracy, trying to make them less 'mysterious'.

Thus we are given a fascinating insight into the day-to-day workings of a controversial bureaucracy, with tidbits such as an official writing to a licensee who had violated conditions of the permission granted to hold a private party in her premises: 'The way you can best please me, however, is by being a real good girl and absolutely observing the law, and keeping clear of doubtful acts of any kind whatever' (p. 51). This was a bureaucracy imbued with moral values, seeing licensed hotels as offering opportunities for individuals to prove their 'self-control' and achieve 'redemption', as well as maintaining licences (perhaps against better judgement) in the face of misdemeanours when the consequences of removal would be the ruin of otherwise reasonable people (p. 51).

Malleck is interested in uncertainty and ambivalence. The LCBO itself, he notes, is an example of the 'politics of moderation' – a 'compromise between the two extremes' of prohibition and an unregulated drink trade (p. 12). Moreover, in practice, the official responses to individual misdemeanours or complaints were, as illustrated by the quotation above, nuanced rather than mechanical and authoritarian. Again, the principle of compromise is crucial, as there was a fear that denying any form of licence to a venue might result in it operating outside the law as a 'blind pig', potentially reducing the control the government could wield over it.

The bureaucracy (unsurprisingly, given the Weberian-Foucauldian framework) is seen as having driving forces of its own: 'in different conflicts between the beverage room in practice and in theory, what often mattered most was the public perception of the board's work' (p. 77). Despite this emphasis of the role of the LCBO as a bureaucracy, Malleck draws attention to the strikingly indefinite form of its control in practice. Regulation fell largely to the initiative of local inspectors, who were often stretched in terms of time and area, and immediate oversight of drinking behaviour within premises rested with the licensees themselves. The Board was therefore reliant on local residents as its eyes and ears, sending through complaints regarding troublesome venues (p. 102).

Malleck's preference for detachment and emphasising ambivalence is in sharp contrast with Robert Duncan's work. *Pubs and Patriots* has a self-consciously political aim: to 'rehabilitate the reputation of the "drinking community", who were condescendingly believed to be unable to control their consumption habits' (pp. 11–12). According to Duncan, 'drink provided a convenient excuse to discipline the labour force', as politicians had 'religious, temperate and class anxieties about the working man being an ungodly, drink-sodden beast of burden' (p. 11).

The structure of *Pubs and Patriots* is largely chronological. Having begun with an introduction to temperance in chapter one, chapter two discusses the early stages of the war, when the debate was shaped partly by bans on vodka and absinthe in Russia and France respectively. After a chapter on Lloyd George's role in the debate in 1915, the book moves on to consider the creation of the CCB. Three case study chapters then follow; one looking at the CCB's work in Carlisle, one at wartime issues of gender and drink, and one at how the CCB sought to 'reform' the 'working man'. The final chapter describes the second time state purchase of the trade was proposed during the war (and the second rejection – the first having been the crucible in which the CCB was formed), and concludes with the demise of the CCB entirely.

Duncan has undertaken considerable primary and secondary research, and includes numerous interesting images to illustrate points (though their effect is muted somewhat by the poor quality of the reproduction). He cites temperance and trade newspapers and pamphlets as well as referencing mainstream newspapers, Hansard, memoirs of the period and secondary sources on specific issues.

The desire to get at 'factual certainties' is clear in the descriptions of sources, as when the words of Lord D'Abernon, chair of the CCB, are followed by the caveat: 'Autobiographical writing aimed at keeping oneself in a job cannot be considered an objective historical source' (p. 5). For better or worse, this is a long way from Malleck's Foucauldian approach to discourse.

The foundation of *Pubs and Patriots* is Duncan's claim that, far from excessive drinking threatening productivity, alcohol consumption had in fact been declining for some years and was not having any significant effect on the war effort.

Although apparently plausible, this conclusion is not unquestionable. It is not self-evident that the decline in alcohol consumption in the early years of the 20th century would have continued without the effects of World War One. Statistics suggest there were four years of growth in alcohol consumption immediately prior to the war, and a very similar pattern of rise and fall can be seen in the 1870s, which was followed by a steady rise through the last years of the 19th century.<sup>(3)</sup> However, the effects of any drinking on productivity are unclear – and it emerges that Duncan thinks 'that it is inconsequential whether a drink problem actually did exist', since the real point he wants to make is that the underlying concerns have little to do with alcohol and much to do with class (p. 13).

In this sense, there is a similarity with Malleck's detachment from the rights and wrongs of prohibition – but Duncan is more interested in the 'drink crisis' as a phenomenon of public debate than the day-to-day operations of the CCB, charting the political and public debate around the creation of the board, its operation and eventual demise.

As might be expected, given the clear aim of the book (to 'rehabilitate' the working class), the analytical framework tends to be somewhat adversarial and framed in binaries – of the trade versus the temperance movement, and the working class versus a 'condescending' (p. 11) ruling elite. Duncan's varied sources illustrate that for many at the time the debates around alcohol were indeed framed in these dialectical terms, but importantly not all the population (or even the Cabinet) was in favour of restrictive licensing legislation – or even agreed that there was an issue with drinking and productivity in the first place.

This nuance within an apparently polarised debate is most powerfully illustrated by the emphasis of Lord D'Abernon, Chairman of the CCB, in describing the board as 'a non-political, non-prohibitionist, and non-teetotal board in this critical junction in the country's history' (quoted p.100). Thus, the CCB consciously attempted to be the synthesis emerging from this dialectic. One would therefore expect an analysis of the period to explore in depth the contradictions and complexities of the debate.

Duncan's adversarial lens is of particular relevance in terms of class – a theme where *Pubs and Patriots* could have been strengthened by a fuller explanation any theoretical underpinnings. Duncan, justifiably, places great emphasis on Lloyd George in securing the changes in licensing arrangements (though stepping back from full state purchase of the trade). E. P. Thompson is cited to suggest that Lloyd George's statements regarding the effects of alcohol consumption on productivity served to construct the working class as 'a set of drunken wasters', as Keir Hardie put it (p. 72). Class, then, is understood in more 'subjective' than 'objective' terms, as Bourdieu might put it: it is a category or set of understandings that structured the public debate around drinking rather than simply a person's position in an occupational hierarchy.<sup>(4)</sup>

This is an extremely persuasive argument – but such an approach to class necessarily implies that public debate is therefore a struggle not simply between the working class and the ruling (or middle) class, but about the relevance and very definitions of these groupings themselves. According to such a perspective, debates and conflicts over key political and moral concepts are a fundamental element of class conflict.

'Respectability' is precisely such a concept, and there is a rich seam of sociological and historical work on the notion and its role in formations of class and gender.<sup>(5)</sup> Duncan notes the importance of this concept to David Gutzke's analysis of the inter-war 'improved public house' movement – a key feature of which was to encourage women into pubs, in the hope they would temper men's behaviour.<sup>(6)</sup> However, rather than interrogating the idea of 'respectability', it is dismissed as being variable in definition, as it is 'in essence an arbitrary judgement, difficult for historians to evaluate as numerous factors contributed to status' (p. 164).

Instead, maintaining the focus on factual certainties, the focus shifts onto arrest figures to demonstrate that ‘accusations of rampant female drunkenness’ were simply mistaken (p. 164).

F. M. L. Thompson described social history as being about ‘ideas and ways of viewing the behaviour and relationships of groups, genders, communities, generations, and classes, and not simply about the “facts” of life’.<sup>(7)</sup> The same principles apply to other forms of history, including a history of public policy, which is demonstrably not simply influenced by ‘facts’. Duncan is at pains to point out that the ‘drink crisis’ was illusory, with the crisis mentality ‘stemmed from a desire to be seen to be doing everything to win the war’ (p. 226). It was, according to Duncan, not so much facts as ideas that prompted the creation of the CCB.

Notably, *Try to Control Yourself* includes nuanced analysis of how ideas of respectability were operationalised by the LCBO and contested by drinkers. Malleck describes how the LCBO inspectors took account of the financial capacity of both manager/owner and patrons in deciding what standards of décor and atmosphere to apply. One venue, for example, was valued for its ability to accommodate patrons in their work clothes, which were greasy from their work in the foundry opposite (p. 67). If the inspector had punished the lack of cleanliness, it was felt that the workers would have had nowhere else to go, and this was considered unhelpful and unjust.

‘Respectability’ also informed ideas of race and nationality, which shaped licensing decisions. Malleck suggests that in justifying the decision in 1937 to grant a license to the Austrian Club in Waterloo, the local inspector drew on ‘the language of respectability’: ‘as a group they are industrious, thrifty and law-abiding citizens’ (p. 205). By contrast, when one individual complained to the LCBO that several hotels had ‘banned colored people’ out of intolerance, a board representative explained that managers might take otherwise undesirable measures in order ‘to operate in an orderly manner’, suggesting that those of ethnic minority backgrounds were generally not felt to be ‘orderly’.

If a general criticism can be levelled at *Pubs and Patriots*, then, it does not relate to the ground covered or the extent of background research undertaken – a social history of wartime drinking or a documentary history of the CCB in the mould of *Try to Control Yourself* would be a different project. Rather, the weakness of *Pubs and Patriots* is in its difficulty in conveying ambivalence and ambiguity.

This issue is revealed in the overall assessment of the CCB itself. Duncan emphasises the continuity of temperance arguments in wartime discussions, and thus at the beginning of the book explains that the CCB did not represent ‘an impressive innovation in drink legislation’ as much as a logical progression (p. 12). However, it is later stated that, ‘To argue that the drink policy implemented during the First World War was not radical ignores the extraneous political, cultural and social circumstances which prevented prohibition being enacted’ (p. 180). Thus, the CCB is ‘radical’, but not an ‘innovation’. The positions may be consistent, but the argument would be strengthened by clearer explanation in the context of an overarching nuanced argument.

Malleck’s Foucauldian approach will not be to everyone’s taste, and reflects only a particular theoretical framework chosen to suit a specific topic of enquiry. However, the history of alcohol is a history of ambivalence and ambiguity. Where should the lines be drawn between sobriety and drunkenness, rationality and irrationality, individual and social responsibility, harm and offence? The interest in the history of alcohol is not that such lines are drawn, but where and how.

It is not fully explored in *Pubs and Patriots* why, apart from simple prejudice, the government expended such time and effort – indeed economic and political capital – on the drink question, if the facts did not support the case. It is noted how alcohol acted as a lightning rod for other social and political concerns, such as the general commitment to the war effort, and the apparent inequality of sacrifice between the home front and the trenches (pp. 55–6). However, in concluding, the symbolic role of alcohol in the war effort is downplayed in favour of the somewhat simplistic statement that ‘the war was not won or lost in the pubs of Britain’ (p. 226).

Thus the weakness of the somewhat polemic, adversarial framing of the arguments in *Pubs and Patriots* is most clearly shown in its conclusion. It is suggested that, after the war, the temperance movement should have ‘raised the white flag’ while ‘the trade came out of the war rather well’ (p. 224). However, the metaphor of surrender belies the acknowledgement – in the same breath – that many moderate temperance aims had been achieved, and were enshrined in the 1921 Licensing Act. If, as Duncan suggests, the ‘drink crisis’ was over after the war, this was not simply because the war itself was over, but rather due to the acceptance of the ‘politics of moderation’ described by Malleck – which could be linked to a broader theme of political ‘consensus’, sometimes seen as emerging in this period.<sup>(8)</sup>

To conclude, the two books take very different approaches, with (presumably) very different audiences in mind. Malleck’s book is, without question, an unashamedly academic book rather than a narrative account of the establishment and development of the LCBO. It may not have widespread popular appeal, yet as a detailed case study of the real-life operation of a bureaucracy, *Try to Control Yourself* is a painstaking yet readable, illuminating piece of work, which should be of great value to any sociologist or historian with an interest in the theory and practice of government.

Moreover, although Malleck does not take an explicit position on the question of whether the LCBO was effective or desirable, *Try to Control Yourself* packs a significant punch in terms of implications for alcohol policy today. Malleck suggests that there was a ‘cultural authority’ associated with the LCBO and liquor regulation in Ontario that has shaped norms and practices surrounding drinking through to the 21st century.

Duncan seems to accept the same role for the CCB (or perhaps the war more broadly), writing in the final chapter of *Pubs and Patriots* that after the war ‘getting drunk was now frowned upon rather than celebrated’ (p. 209). Duncan suggests that ‘the drink problem was not as controversial in 1939 as it had been during the Great War. Society had moved on’ (p. 220). The fact that society had apparently moved on could be the result of the very policies that Duncan appears to think were misguided. Indeed, Duncan writes favourably:

What was radical about the CCB was the fact that the Board, with its blend of restrictive and constructive policy, managed to implement practical reform, like supporting industrial canteens, which sought to resolve the drink crisis engulfing the country and cut through eighty years of antagonistic squabbling between the temperance movement and the trade. (p. 180)

The success of wartime alcohol policy might therefore be seen in historian Paul Jennings’ summation of the period: ‘From being given maximum prominence by its perceived threat to the war effort, drink as an issue was ultimately to be largely neutralised by its effects’.<sup>(9)</sup>

A gap in the literature remains for a focused, systematic study of how such a change in the attitudes to drink – both in Westminster and the pub – was affected by the operations of wartime drinking regulation in Britain. However, as noted above, *Pubs and Patriots* is not a history or even evaluation of the CCB so much as a history of the wartime debates that constituted the ‘drink crisis’. As such, it is a widely researched resource on wartime alcohol policy that will be valuable to those with an interest in how different approaches to alcohol regulation have been undertaken according to the particular circumstances of the times.

I began this review with a reference to the claim in the *BMJ* that today's Coalition Government had engaged in a 'sham' by holding a consultation on the alcohol strategy, since it had met with industry representatives a significant number of times before changing its mind on minimum unit pricing. It might be that 100 years has in fact brought us full circle, back to the days described by Duncan of 'two contradictory and entrenched positions' (p. 102) structuring public debate of alcohol policy, with today's 'gridlocked antagonism' (p. 224) being between public health campaigners and the industry. *Pubs and Patriots*, then, is indeed timely, and not simply due to the anniversary of the First World War.

## Notes

1. Jonathan Gornall, 'Alcohol and public health: under the influence', *BMJ*, 348 (f7646), < <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.f7646> [3] > [accessed 2 February 2014].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Basingstoke, 1985), p. 210 – quoted in Paul Jennings, *The Local: A History of the English Pub* (Stroud, 2011), p.183.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. House of Commons Health Committee (2010) *Alcohol, First Report of Session 2009–10* < <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmhealth/151/15106.htm> [4] >[Accessed 2 February 2014].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Pierre Bourdieu, 'What makes a social class? On the theoretical and practical existence of groups', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 32 (1987), 1–17.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For example: F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830–1900* (London, 1988); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1984); Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender* (London, 1997).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. David Gutzke, *Pubs and Progressives: Reinventing the Public House in England 1896–1960* (DeKalb, IL, 2006).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. F. M. L. Thompson *The Rise of Respectable Society*, p.9.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Keith Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society: The Experience of the British System since 1911* (London, 1979).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Paul Jennings, *The Local: A History of the English Pub*, p.183.[Back to \(9\)](#)

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[4] <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmhealth/151/15106.htm>

[5] <http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2014/03/drink-crisis-during-world-war-one>