

A History of Drink and the English, 1500–2000

Review Number: 2110

Publish date: Thursday, 18 May, 2017

Author: Paul Jennings

ISBN: 9781848935556

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £95.00

Pages: 230pp.

Publisher: Routledge

Publisher url: <https://www.routledge.com/A-History-of-Drink-and-the-English-15002000/Jennings/p/book/9781848>

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Pam Lock

Good reference books on the history of alcohol remain few and far between, despite increased interest in the area in the last 20 years. Until now, alcohol studies has relied on a range of specialist studies and a small number of general surveys such as Greenaway's *Drink and British Politics since 1830*, Nicholls's *The Politics of Alcohol*, and Schmid and Schmidt-Haberkamp's *Drink in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*.⁽¹⁾ Paul Jennings's new title in Routledge's 'Perspectives in Economic and Social History' series is an extremely valuable addition to the growing body of work on the history of drink from one of the most influential researchers in the drinking studies field. Described in the publisher's description as an introduction to alcohol studies, *A History of Drink and the English, 1500–2000* is this, and much more. It gives students and researchers access to Jennings's encyclopaedic knowledge of drink history from over 20 years' study, making this book a real treat for specialists. Jennings employs a large and wide-ranging variety of sources, from taxation data and court reports to literary and theatrical renditions. Nonetheless, he manages this densely-packed history adeptly to create a very readable, often lively account, accessible to general as well as specialist readers. The book's combination of thematic and chronological organisation makes it easy to navigate. These key themes cover a range common to all disciplines of alcohol studies. Coverage of an impressive 500-year period, one of the longest periods of any history devoted to drink, makes it an excellent introductory survey. I have already found it invaluable for teaching undergraduates on our 'Drink: A History' module at Bristol.

Each chapter begins with a well-considered overview of what it will cover and why, with a summary of what has been written on this area to date. Chapters are structured in chronological sections that give readers the option to focus on particular periods; a useful addition given the broad chronological span. The dense referencing is well chosen, demonstrating the breadth of sources. Each chapter, in addition to comprehensive footnotes, is also followed by an individual bibliography – user-friendly for both teaching and research.

Although the key themes outlined in the seven chapters are based on practical aspects – 'Drinking', 'Producers and sellers', 'Places and spaces', 'Meanings', 'Drunks', 'Anti-drink', and 'Regulation' – the book also attends to themes such as gender and class thoughtfully throughout. There is a slight northern bias in certain sections. However, this is only partly resultant from Jennings's personal research interests in this area of the UK. There is a good rationale for emphasising the changing drinking culture in the north in such

cases, especially in response to industrialisation and in terms of the development of anti-drink movements. There are some very useful diagrams. I particularly like the 'Schema of pub interiors' (p. 79) which give a valuable selection of examples of pub interiors from early beerhouses to inter-war improved houses based on the author's own research. However, some of the pictures (for example 'Pub interior, Bolton, 1938') would have benefited from higher quality printing or a higher resolution image.

The introduction gives a clear concise sense of author's purpose and methodology as well as the logic behind the book's structure. Jennings lays out his key propositions very appropriate to a study of this kind which go on to form the backbone of his thesis: the 'central importance of alcohol in human societies', the 'ambivalence of alcohol' (ie. that it is viewed both positively and negatively), and 'the history of drink reflects broader economic, social, cultural and political developments in society and it can only be properly understood by analysing their interplay' (pp. 1–3). There are additionally two 'final assertions'; 'the importance of a global context' and 'the significance of regional and local variation' (p. 3).

The chapter on 'Drinking' begins 'with some basic, essential questions: how much was drunk, what types of drink, by whom and how have these changed over time?' (p. 9). From these simple beginnings, Jennings quickly builds a clear explanation of the complexities of the data used by drink historians. He takes a practical approach to these uncertainties by suggesting possible methods by which to estimate or discover otherwise unrecorded drink, from innocent home brews to illegal manufacture and trade. Jennings uses specific examples to outline changes in ways of collecting drink-related data including court records and parliamentary inquiries, and flags bias in historical records specific to drink history, such as brewery-sponsored reports and temperance campaigner historians. To mitigate these issues, Jennings explores George Wilson's 1940 taxonomy of influences on the consumption of alcohol (opportunity, social change, education, and moral causes) from his pioneering study *Alcohol and the Nation* (p. 9). This sets the rationale well for the chapter in its critique of the 'deceptively simple' components of each grouping, while also drawing attention to the possible impact of Wilson's temperance beliefs on his selection and handling of his statistics and sources. Particularly successful is the problematising of contemporary accounts in relation to varying social norms, both regional and chronological, and the awareness of a particular writer's wish to abide by or challenge them. The peppering of Pepys throughout acts as one of the many historical touchstones which aid the reader's orientation in the long chronological period covered.

The chapter 'Producers and sellers' investigates the blurred line between domestic or private and commercial production. From medieval women selling their surplus domestic ales to a tied system of brewery-owned or franchised public houses, this chapter charts the production and sale of alcoholic drinks. The movement of alcohol for sale is one of the most ancient trades, and '[t]he drink trade may thus be thought of as global long before the modern concept of globalization came to be applied to it' (p. 39). However, Jennings pays particular attention to that 'quintessentially English institution', the public house. In this and the following chapter, he builds on his *The Local: A History of the English Pub* (2), with fresh sources and examples.

'Places and spaces' gives a carefully nuanced history of public drinking spaces; alehouses, taverns, public houses, beer houses and gin-shops. Given the space constraints, Jennings does a good job of giving the reader a general overview while maintaining a sense of the individuality of drinking spaces and regional variations. The range of drinking institutions described as 'public houses' is particularly interesting; from the elaborate 'gin-palace style' decorated with glass, tile and terracotta whose attractions came to be dreaded by policy makers, to 'low, dark and poorly ventilated' pubs (p. 80).

The chapter also pays attention to gender, synthesising recent evidence from historians such as Mark Hailwood and Susan Kling that women were a much greater part of the clientele of drinking institutions even before the 'boom' in female public drinking during the First World War than has previously been thought.

'Meanings' provides a welcome reminder that drinking is a normal part of English national culture and, for

many people, alcohol has a positive social and symbolic role; in Jennings's pithy formula: 'This chapter is concerned with what drinking means to the drinker' (p. 99). The chapter is divided into four sections 'Physical' (both physical purposes and effects), 'Psychological' (mood, courage, and sex), 'Symbolic and ritual' (from the Egyptians to the 1980s!), and 'Sociability' (fellowship and leisure). This is an important subject that deserves more in-depth discussion than the 13 pages allowed here (other chapters average 18 pages). Jennings identifies a common theme in the literature on the socio-cultural meanings of drinking as the 'positive role which alcohol has played in people's lives', in contrast to the generally negative attitude encouraged by research on regulation or social issues. The 'Psychological' section in particular could have been longer and more detailed and the lack of comment on the symbolism of drink and drinking in the 1980s in terms of social status/class was a little surprising.

Although not chronologically ordered as in the previous chapters, the chronological breadth is retained. There is some particularly rich detail on symbolic and ritual drinking. Jennings includes useful information on the 17th-century tradition of Saint Monday – the extra day taken after the weekend's drinking to recover from or continue the revels, and how it came to decline in the 19th century and die out in the 20th century. There is also a good section on funeral rituals – some debauched, some respectable – such as the 19th-century tradition of the dead leaving money for drinks for the living, like a final round. The whistle-stop tour of the evolution from drinking someone's health to buying rounds as part of pub rituals is extremely interesting and well set out. Jennings wryly explains this enduring tradition as 'an expression of the English devotion to taking one's turn' (p. 112, citing Kate Fox).

Being drunk is one of the most important 'functions and meanings of drinking' but in 'Drunks' Jennings asks 'what constitutes being drunk?' The answer begins with an enlightening specific example from a head constable of Liverpool in 1909: 'His state might be interpreted in ten different ways: from a total abstainer's perception of him as "beastly drunk", through varying shades of opinion such as "drunk but able to take care of himself" or "slightly under the influence", to the man himself — "painfully sober: almost in a state of collapse for want of a drink"' (p. 122). The difficulties of defining drunkenness, or at least the boundary between sobriety and intoxication, are explored as a culturally determined phenomenon. Attitudes in the courts are particularly influential, and charts the many legislative attempts to solve the problem, including combining drunkenness offences with other offences (such as being drunk and disorderly) to define the offence more easily, and the introduction of blood alcohol and breathalyser quantifications in the mid-20th century as a result of increased anxieties around drink driving. The comparison of early and late 20th-century definitions reveals strong similarities in descriptions of the progress of drunkenness from 'conversational' to vomiting or sleep, or resulting in 'unconsciousness, coma and death' in extreme cases. Jennings's relish for language gives rise to an enjoyable exploration of historical drinking slang including some very unusual examples such as 'a climax of fuddlement' (p. 124). He also reveals that 'pissed' originated from the 18th-century term 'Piss'd in the Brook' (p. 123).

The next section addresses the eternal question in drinking studies: *why* do people get drunk? Beginning with a disclaimer that the section cannot grapple with the extensive psychological literature, Jennings produces a short list of 'general motivations to enable us to make some sense historically of the experience' (p. 125): sociability or good fellowship, altering consciousness in a 'controlled loss of control' (noting the violence of many expressions for drunkenness; plastered, smashed), and oblivion or escape. Discussing levels of drunkenness across 500 years, this section emphasises the 19th century as marking the 'break' in earlier drinking behaviours and a reduction in drinking levels in England. Jennings cites the falling rate of criminal proceedings nationally as a proof of this decline, carefully matching these statistics to other measures such as consumption trends. Continuing his interest in class distinctions, Jennings notes social hierarchies in relation to police attention to drunkenness, evidencing that arrests and prosecutions come 'overwhelmingly from the labouring classes' (p. 132). However, he accounts for the decline in drunkenness in the labouring classes not through changes to policing or legislation but in 'improved working-class living standards' and a 'belief in the ideal of respectability' (p. 134).

The chapter's conclusion, reflecting on the emphasis on youth drinking in the latter half of the 20th century,

draws on reports from police and journalists to highlight the contemporary anxiety around youth drinking. Through the figures of the lager lout and football hooligan, Jennings usefully compares the need to seek escape with the element of thrill-seeking in the violent disorder associated with the drinking cultures of this period.

'Anti-drink' is broken into more or less chronological sections although these also reflect the division between temperance and 'the drink question'. Two early (17th century) 'strands of opposition to drink' are identified; drunkenness as a sin and drunkenness as a threat to social order (p. 150). The chapter charts the evolution of the temperance movement from a paternalist middle-class movement predominantly focussed on spirits and reforming the working-classes, to a radical working-class movement bent on total abstinence. This overview is a useful synthesis of the many conflicting accounts of the evolution of temperance. Jennings also usefully disentangles the temperance movement from broader British interest in the 'drink question' and related anxiety about drinking and the liquor trade. The importance of class and gender to these questions is explored through the influence of empire and the weakening of successive generations of labourers which caused social policy-makers to focus on the drinking of women of child-bearing age. This links to disputes in 19th-century social theory about whether drink was the cause of poverty, as argued by many temperance campaigners, or whether poverty was the cause of excessive drinking, as contended by socialist campaigners. A brief overview of the political place of temperance and anti-drink sentiment usefully draws together many references throughout. Particularly interesting are the reflections on war- and peace-time attitudes to the drink question in the first half of the 20th century. The shift in focus of anti-drink discourses to drink driving and public health from the second world war onwards is quirkily introduced by with an example of 'drink driving' from 1792 in which a man 'very much in liquor' was killed by a fall from his horse (p. 168). This is followed by a serious discussion of the involvement of the press in increasing the profile of drink driving as a primary issue from the 1960s. The chapter ends with a thoughtful discussion on the recent 'public-health movement' and cites Henry Yeomans's comparison between this movement and 19th-century temperance, before firmly concluding that, despite its similarities, it was not the 'Demon Drink of the nineteenth century' (p. 171).

Jennings concludes with one of drink history's central topics; 'Regulation' and licensing. The state's considerable 'financial interest in drink' generates an inherent conflict of interest, which has often made the moral duty of government to protect its citizens against the associated risks of drink secondary to the fiscal risks presented by unlicensed trading. The excise on drink 'became the largest department of government and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries generated an essential financial support to Britain's' dominant position in the world' (p. 185), making up more than half the government's revenue during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. This is counter-balanced by an overview of other objectives sought through legislation, such as curbing gin-drinking in the 18th century and protecting children from early exposure to alcohol in 2000.

There is some excellent colour in the detail provided on what can be a dry subject. For example, alehouse keepers in certain areas were not allowed to keep apprentices and servants in their premises after designated hours of the evening and could be subject to substantial fines for doing so. This reminded me of the (more informal) arrangement in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* where Miss Abbey Potterson sends her regulars home at times determined by their wives. A section on 'The early development of regulation' puts the revenue motivation for licensing in perspective, reminding the reader that these early fines associated with the assize of ale were also designed to protect the customer, and were likewise applied to bread as a way of 'ensuring the availability of good drink at a fair price in specified measures' (p. 187).

Jennings reasserts the importance of using local examples to demonstrate the national framework of regulation. The 1872 Licensing Act included some unusual additions such as a 'cheaper six-day licence for those willing to close on the Sabbath' (p. 194). One aspect that stands out is the consistent emphasis on 'good behaviour' in regulation and the ways in which this was established, in both traders and consumers. Indeed, only in 1904 did the 'controversial' Licensing Act include the power to refuse licences on 'grounds other than misconduct' (p. 195). Even this required compensation levied from licensed premises because,

although licenses were granted in law for only one year and at the discretion of magistrates, in practice licenses were treated as a form of property for which landlords and owners expected reimbursement. While the Act did reduce the number of drinking premises considerably, as planned, the costs were considerable. Jennings then turns to regulation of premises: opening hours, entertainment, and even the construction and layout of drinking establishments have been subject to local or central control throughout the period. A section on the First World War explores the causalities in the decline in drinking and questions previous accounts of the primacy of regulation, reminding the reader that other factors including availability were also important to this reduction. In the post-war 20th century, Jennings charts the re-focus of alcohol awareness campaigns and legislation on public health, including the impact of the increase in interest in the welfare of children in government policy.

Jennings concludes by reflecting on his five key assertions. He notes that although drink continues to have a central importance in human society, the decline of consumption charted in this history indicates a decline in that importance. Nonetheless, he argues that drink remains widely available and is drunk; for example, drinking establishments remain a key part of the regeneration of English towns and cities. On alcohol's ambivalence, particularly in the contrast between the chapters on 'Meanings' (which is distinctly angled towards the beneficent and convivial aspects of drinking) and 'Anti-drink', he expounds the continued importance of the history of drink as a 'product of interlinked economic, social, cultural, and political developments' (p. 212). Even relatively constant aspects such as the condemnation of drinking by women is, as he points out, 'different at different times'.

The only mild disappointments for me are that little attention is given to domestic violence associated with drinking, and that the quality and number of reproductions should have been better given the high price of the book. (Hogarth's *Gin Lane* is such a familiar image that it really suffers in a poor quality reproduction.) This monograph is inevitably brief and often tantalising in parts as it reveals Jennings's impressive grasp of the macro and micro picture of the long chronological period addressed. Overall, this is a valuable addition to drink history literature providing a much-needed introduction. For the alcohol scholar, *A History of Drink and the English*, provides a synthesis of a broad range of interdisciplinary works on alcohol studies, from Brian Harrison's seminal *Drink and the Victorians* to Carpenter's anthropological perspectives in *Constructive Drinking* (3), evaluated and commented upon by one of the most knowledgeable and measured scholars in the area.

Notes

1. John Greenaway, *Drink and British Politics since 1830: A Study in Policy-Making* (Basingstoke, 2003); James Nicholls, *The Politics of Alcohol: A History of the Drink Question in England; Drink in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Susanne Schmid and Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp (Cambridge, 2014).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Paul Jennings, *The Local: A History of the English Pub* (Stroud, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: Temperance Question in England, 1815–1872* (London, 1971); Mary Douglas, *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology* (London, 1987).[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

Alcohol and Drugs History Society

<https://alcoholanddrugshistorysociety.org/2016/11/01/drink-and-the-english-review/> [2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2110>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/161689>

[2] <https://alcoholanddrugshistorysociety.org/2016/11/01/drink-and-the-english-review/>