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History of Drinking: The Scottish Pub Since 1700

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There can be few social historians who don't sometimes, somehow, have to deal with drinking. Alcohol has featured so centrally in western societies that it must be regarded in many ways as more pivotal than food to social relations, gender identities, domestic life, health and fiscal matters. Drink is far less beneficial of course than food. It is often painted as the 'demon drink', the scourge of economic efficiency, driving safety, good order and high morals. But its influence is undeniable. It plays a huge part in national identities, though here people's affections can be very fickle. The central institution in British life has been the public house, a place of community recourse for centuries. Yet it was a place where very many people never dared to go. There must have been millions of women for whom the pub was off-limits even when it was a near neighbour for their whole lives. In societies where respectability clashed with the rough, no institution divided society as much as the public house.

A central claim of Tony Cooke's book is that historians have not paid sufficient attention to the public house in Scotland. Interestingly, perhaps, there has been quite a lot of attention applied assiduously by Scottish historians to the drink itself. I recall as a young graduate student hearing from an established historian an earnest conference paper on the drinks industry which gave detailed analysis of the attractive qualities of Fowler's Wee Heavy. Much has been written on the whisky industry, on the role of the public house in Scotland's literary culture, on the temperance movement, and on drink in party politics, albeit most of it on the 19th century. There is a distinctive pride in Scotland on how the nation's life and values have been erected around the democratic conviviality of the pub – though, if truth be told, this is little different from the role of drinking establishments in most other European countries. Yet, it is important to remember that a huge element of Scottish political and social leadership has been deeply opposed to the drinks trade. Indeed, there is a case to be made that in the early 20th century Scotland had the strongest

temperance, teetotal and prohibitionist movements in Western Europe, and that this influence was core to what one journalist in 1978 described as ‘an eighteenth-century closed-mouthed Presbyterianism’ that still governed Scottish civil life into the third and even the fourth quarters of the last century.

Research into the power of the teetotaller remains to be completed, and in this sense Cooke is right. But with the collapse of Scotland’s puritanical religious culture in the later 20th century, the liberalisation of the law, the release of public spaces from invidious controls, and the decline of the Sabbath that saw the opening of public houses on Sundays in the 1970s and the final ending of restrictive Sunday rules for off-licences in the 2000s, new freedoms came to the Scottish people. For the history of drink is the history of restriction, a subject well covered in this volume. Cooke provides detailed coverage of the main restrictive measures and their collapse. But the real focus here is on the location, management and social functionality of the public house. The book provides a vivid sense of the changing atmosphere of the pub – from its various 18th-century types through to the modern incarnations. We learn a huge amount about investors and publicans, the vast bulk of them men, but we also learn a lot about their wives who oftentimes inherited pubs and sometimes kept them going. We get lots of detail about the value of pubs, inheritance, the drinks passed on at death, and the perhaps surprising social mix of those who became licensees. We also learn much about the barman and his long hours of labour. There is a richness to the sources that Cooke has trawled, and trawled with great energy, around all parts of Scotland. Photographs and line drawings adorn the pages to give the reader an idea of the insides and outside of the Scottish pub. Though the gleaming stars of the nation’s pubs tend to dominate (Glasgow’s Horse Shoe Bar is on the cover), one or two bleaker hostelries feature providing a hint of those dour foxholes and gloomy rooms with which every serious Scottish drinker became familiar in the past.

As Cooke reminds us, the pub was a gendered space – the Glasgow working man’s living room as he left his wife and weans at home in the single end or room and kitchen. We might have learned a bit more about the changes wrought in our lifetimes – the Women’s Liberation Movement demonstration in 1970 outside Morningside’s Merlin pub, which I was known to frequent, against that ‘No Women’ sign; the ending of the frosted windows and double-door rule demanded by the magistrates to prevent children and good folk from being corrupted by the sight of men drinking; and the ending in the mid-1970s of the madness of the ten-minute drinking-up time at 10pm, when pints were lined up on the bar and drunk one after the other before punters tried to steer their cars in a straight line homewards. We learn a lot about urban shebeens of the early 1900s, but less about the equally illegal rural ‘bochans’ still going in the 1970s on the Isle of Lewis where, at that time, the power of the Wee Frees and Wee Wee Frees (strict presbyterian churches) ensured there were no licensed premises outside of Stornoway. We are told of magistrates permitting dominoes and darts when cards were banned; but then there are the pubs at Bridgeton Cross still guarded today by scores of police officers as fans head home from Parkhead. The book tells of lawyers’ drinking howffs in Edinburgh, but little detail of the drink-based initiation rites of those and other trades. There is much to be learned about pub etiquette and the social graces, or the lack of them.

We are introduced to some important and until recently neglected aspects of Scottish pub life. One is the gay and lesbian pub, to which the author devotes three pages (pp. 200–2). Another, though

covered much more briefly, is the position of drinking in the Scottish planned communities built from the 1920s to the 1970s – peripheral housing schemes and new towns. In truth, an entire book could (and should) be written on this topic, for, alongside the attempted separation of cars and pedestrians, it was one of the greatest failures of modern state policy. There are similar themes to which attention might be paid. One was the lack of effective distinction between licensed grocers and pubs in the mid-19th century that led to the sale of whisky by the glass, consumed on the premises, leading to the invention of the off-license. These were institutions deserving of close

attention for their huge variety – from the trendy wine cellars serving the middling and richer sorts of Edinburgh, to the armour plated and grilled hatches of places like Govan in the 1970s. Hotel bars are given some coverage, notably in relation to the *bona fide* traveller (though the bar's ledger for this customer is not mentioned), but in most cases these form a different licensing category and so are rather sidelined when, in reality, most were like any other public house. I wanted to know more, too, about the range of bars on many premises: the public bar and the lounge bar, and (top of the tree) the cocktail bar (which for much of its existence didn't seem to serve cocktails at all). Music and its place in the bar are touched upon in the book, most often to be banned by the licensing authorities in order to separate pubs from speak 'n' easies and music halls; however, music survived to be one of the great features of the Scottish pub. The nature of 'buying a round' deserves some attention for its relative peculiarity to our islands. This reviewer craved more detail on many topics, more leeway to pursue the drinking institutions in whichever direction they are to be found.

Drinking and eating is one case in point. Cooke does note the significance of 18th-century inns not only for the serving of fine food but for attracting cooks who (in turn) attracted the attention of young women desirous of training in the culinary arts. But the Scottish barman trained later often seems to have detested food. His attitude seems to have been that drink was the purpose of a bar, and nothing else. Crisps arrived in the 1960s in most pubs, though many will remember the nauseous Scotch pies in the bar-top heater, then one of the few hot food outlets to be found in many places, reluctantly given space by demand. I recall when I was trained in 1974 by the bar steward of a leading golf club in St Andrews that he detested food; his wife made a few bread roll sandwiches for golfers coming off the fairways, but he would have nothing more, pointing to what had happened to the town's famous Castle Tavern when the brewery demanded the serving of the food fad of the era, the toasted sandwich: barmen spent their time bent over the toaster in the corner, and failed to serve the queue of thirsty customers. To this day, Scottish bar food doesn't match the institutional importance of food in the English pub, whose Sunday Roast, now available on many days of the week, became long ago the custodian of one of the formerly domestic customs of the people. Despite the liberalisation of the Scottish drinks law, the now-vast demand for food with drink (and in many cases food with a soft drink or coffee), and the ending of spit 'n' sawdust masculinity, there lingers a cultural narrowness to the Scottish public bar, seemingly deliberately cultivated to conjure an atmosphere of democratic couthiness.

Every reader familiar with Scottish pubs will find things unsaid that they might wish to have been dwelt upon in any history of drinking, and it is unfair of me to belabour the point unduly. Yet this does underline Cooke's key point about the pivotal role of the public house in so much of Scottish life. In a nation characterised for so long by a poverty in the built environment, with poor quality construction and small homes, public spaces were at a premium. Many were churches which, unlike the diverse usages of those in England, were and remain off limits to non-religious community functions. The Scottish pub acquired heightened significance, yet until the last 70 years or so perhaps failing to accomplish all it could have done. The law and the do-gooders interfered too much, for one thing, fencing entry to the bar more successful than any kirk elder fenced the communion table. Cooke has done a great deal to show us the diversity of the place over three centuries. He has laboured hard, using a huge diversity of archival sources, and has read widely in literature and local history to show the ways in which the Scottish pub distilled so much of our culture in one room. He fixes details on the economics and demographics as well as the society of the bar; he gives us prices and valuations, numbers of pubs per inhabitant, and builds a well-written account of the commerce, sociability and drinking communities of the country. The narrative is pacy, bowling the reader through the story with acumen and insight. Much remains to be done, notably on the 20th-century clash of drink and temperance cultures, but the author has raised a spectrum of issues and observations off which following scholars can feed.