

Early-modern drinking habits: An important repository of knowledge

Alcohol in the Early Modern World: A Cultural History
Edited by B Ann Tlusty

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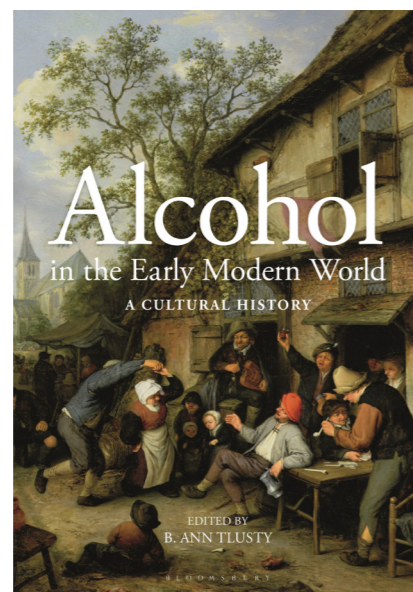
The way people drink these days would undoubtedly be just one of the various systematic shocks to which an early-modern country-dweller of 1500 would be subjected if they were teleported into our own troubled century. No longer confined to home-brewed ale or the occasional goblet of wine imported from the sunnier climes of southern Europe, we have the entire global menu of liquid intoxicants at our command. Bewilderingly, though, rather than rejoicing in the cornucopia thus furnished, the business of drinking has become polarized between elevated connoisseurship at one end of the social spectrum and omnibulvous excess at the other, the stretching hiatus between these extremes filled with nervous self-chastisement over the medical and moral implications of drinking too much, drinking at the wrong times of day, drinking for the wrong reasons, or drinking at all.

Our 16th-century peasant hardly lives in an atmosphere free of censure with regard to wine. He might hear sermons preached against it on one of the few occasions in the annual calendar when he goes to the Catholic mass, the exhortations against it counterpoised by the wine shared out at the Eucharist. Occasional tracts against the sin of drunkenness are published by the fledgling printing presses in a language he cannot read, if indeed he could read at all. Meanwhile, there are church ales, those prolonged outdoor festivals of

merriment and relative licence. Drinking on the village green or outside the taverns and alehouses is the resort of all, regardless of social station. Ale is brewed in the home, by either one's own wife or a neighbor's. Drink is nutritious, is part of a humorally balanced diet, and makes a welcome change from well-water. It is one of life's amenities, endorsed as such in the Bible by the Psalmist and, in his more pliant temper, by St Paul.

Wine for wine's sake

Bloomsbury's new collection of essays on institutional and cultural aspects of drinking during roughly a quarter-millennium from 1500 to 1750 is eloquent on the comparative values accorded to alcohol and its effects in Europe and the Americas in the period known as the early modern. It is interesting to learn, for example, that the traditional historical view that people drank alcohol in this era principally because it was safer than the risk of infection from polluted water has gone the same revisionist way as the notion in earlier food history that spices were originally used as a way of disguising rotten meat. Waterborne disease was an issue, but the water in natural springs and wells was generally



reliable, so alcohol was not just a default recourse but was mostly enjoyed in and for itself as a gift from God.

Tlusty's own contribution to the volume, apart from a valuable scene-setting introduction, is on the medicinal and hygienic applications of drink. She notes that, in the humoral system inherited by the medieval world from Galenic theory, intoxication from wine was just as beneficial to those whose excess of black bile produced a melancholic temperament in them as wine itself was. Indeed, inebriation could be seen as a useful component of a careful regimen, up to and including the purgative nature of vomiting. Brandy, in particular, being a concentrate of the natural heat and moisture present in wine, was seen as a panacea, applied by doctors "as an antidote for emotional problems (such as melancholy and insomnia); as an anesthetic for virtually every kind of pain (toothache, headache, stomach ache, labor pains, etc.); as an aid to digestion; as a cure for forgetfulness; to relieve the symptoms of plague; to lose weight; and even as a remedy for graying hair and deafness." It was mixed with pounded herbs and smeared onto the enraged swellings of gout—with what eventual effect one forbears, admittedly, to imagine.

In time, the medical focus on drinking shifted from particular types of drinks and their matching or otherwise to the humoral composition of individuals, to the danger of overuse. By the late 17th century, drunkenness was a malady not of body fluids but of reason, while medicine itself had ceased paying attention to the particular responses and dispositions of each patient and had become a matter of universal application in the shape of pills, powders, and tinctures, some of them alcohol-based. It had begun to treat symptoms rather than the whole underlying being and, in the process, had decoupled drinking from its role in a healthy consumption system and left it as a purely recreational resort.

This may always have been the best part of it, but once there was more or less nothing else apart from that, it began to nosedive through the carefully calibrated strata of moral expectation until it would produce grotesque social calamities like the London gin plague of the 1730s and '40s.

A cloak of Edenic innocence?

Mark Hailwood, one of the principal movers in the enormously productive academic colloquium the Drinking Studies Network, contributes a chapter on the gendering of drink in the period under study, resetting the traditional view that social drinking was always a male-dominated pastime. Women's role in brewing has long been a historical factor—in Aberdeen in 1509, all 152 of the town's beer-brewers were women—but the carousals on church grounds and village greens did not by any means exclude women. Groups of unaccompanied women drinking in inns were by no means unknown either, but it was the general move indoors, into the rougher and readier purlieus of taverns and alehouses, that played a role in the gender transition in consumption habits. In the more restrictive European polities, women would be expressly forbidden to frequent taverns, but they might still manage it in domestic contexts such as the collective drinking of lying-in celebrations that followed a safe and successful childbirth.

An essay by Matthew Jackson on the growing body of regulation surrounding drinking is an equally helpful corrective to those who have characterized the accretion of law around alcohol as a gradual but inexorable encroachment on freedom. Regulation was far more effective in protecting consumers from short measures, adulteration, and substandard products than it was in determining when they had to stop drinking and what would happen to them if they succumbed to that permanently elusive state known as drunkenness. In the context of near-universal drinking, the numbers of early-modern prosecutions for being drunk and disorderly are modest indeed. In 16th-century Augsburg, a period of rapid demographic expansion, indictments for drunkenness hovered between 42 and 64 cases per year.



The following century in England, when Protestant fervor ignited the shire counties, Lancashire and Warwickshire registered only 22 prosecutions for inebriation between them, out of a total of nearly 8,000 offenses.

Marc Forster delineates the religious and ideological valences of alcohol, tracing its career through the three monotheistic faiths of the Western world. Martin Luther pays due obeisance to the theme of drunkenness as one of the manifestations of the deadly sin of gluttony or intemperance in a sermon of 1539, but he was not constitutionally given to recommending enforced abstinence among the faithful or—unlike the more ferocious John Calvin—to excessive secular regulation. Tavern and church lived in harmonious symbiosis in the lives of the peasantry throughout most of the early-modern period, even if the growing confessional gulf between Catholic and Protestant was often defined by drinking habits as between wine and beer, and the relative quantities taken. The role of *pulque* and *chicha* in the spiritual rituals of Aztec and Inca societies was complicated by the arrival of Spanish colonialists with their sacramental grape wine, until European infection and murderous repression wiped out the indigenous cultures altogether.

The volume concludes with an excellent essay by Beat Kümin on the cultural representations of alcohol during the early-modern epoch, which ranges from inn signs and drinks menus, to Inca drinking cups and

European toasting rituals. The last, in particular, was a fluidly cross-class practice but always undertaken with the proper air of something akin to a religious ritual. The bestowal of health and the consolidation of friendship demanded nothing less. For this, an intoxicant was essential. To drink to someone's wellbeing in sparkling spring water was barely a toast at all, almost as nefarious as the practice Tlusty mentions in her introduction of anti-toasting, drinking against the best interests of another with maledictions, the practice of confessional and political rivals, as well as those about to command forces in battle.

Alcohol in the Early Modern World is a copious resource that will form the basis and background for many more specifically detailed historical enquiries. It offers no narrative history of the old-fashioned kind. One might regret the absence, say, of a case study of a particular rural community during the turbulent tides of the Reformation, or something on the extent to which attitudes to drinking were reset by the growing influence of the Puritan temperament in England's revolutionary century. As a body of scholarly research on the place of drink in the social affairs and cultural imagination of a world poised on the brink of the age of enlightenment, however, this is an important and versatile repository of knowledge. If drinking was ever cloaked in something like Edenic innocence, it was about to shed the mantle forever.