Early-modern drinking habits:
An important repository of knowledge

Alcohol in the Early Modern World: A Cultural History
Edited by B Ann Tlusty
Published by Bloomsbury Academic
209 pages, $175 / £130

Reviewed by Stuart Walton

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 were they teleported into our own troubled century. No longer confined to home-brewed ale or the occasional goblet of wine imported from the summer lanes of southern Europe, we have the entire global menu of liquid intoxicants at our command. It still makes one marvel, though, rather than rejoice in the cornucopia thus furnished, the business of drinking has become polarized between elevated connoisseurship at one end of the social spectrum and omnipresent excess at the other: the stretching hiatus between the two extremes filled with nervous moments. This is 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 1720s and '30s.

A cloak of Edenic innocence? Mark Hailwood, one of the principal movers in the enormously productive academic colloquiums the Drinking Studies Network, contributes a chapter on the gendering of drink in the period under study, restating 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 casuals 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 rounder and readier purflings of taverns and alehouses, that played a role in the gendering of consumption habits.

In time, the medical focus on alcohol and what would happen when they had to stop drinking on the growing body of regulation meant exclude women. Groups of women would be expressly moved in the gender transition in consumption. An essay by Matthew Johnson 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 unsanitary production than it was in determining when they had to stop drinking and what would happen then. 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 a cloak of Edenic innocence, it was at least about to command forces in battle.

Europe's golden age of drinking. The following century in England, when Protestant fervor ignited the shire counties, Lancashire and Warwickshire registered some 24 prosecutions for inebriation between them, out of a total of nearly 8,000 offenses. Mark Foster delineates the religious and ideological valences of alcohol, tracing its career through the three monothestic faiths of the Western world. Martin Luther pays due obeisance to the theme of drunkenness as one of the manifestations of the deadly sins of gluttony or intemperance in a sermon of 1539, but he was not constitutionally given to recommending enforced abstinence among the faithful — 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. While European infection and murderous repression wiped out the indigenous cultures altogether, the volume concludes with an excellent essay by Beat Kumin on the cultural representations of alcohol during the early modern epoch, which ranges from min 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 existential shift and the consolidation of friendship demanded no such thing. For this, an intoxicant was essential. To drink to someone’s wellbeing in sparkling spring water was as much a rite as it was, almost as nefarious as the practice of anti-toasting, drinking against the best interests of another with maledictions.

Alcohol in the Early Modern World is a copious resource that will form the basis and background for many more specifically detailed historical inquiries. 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. But this is a copious resource, which is a copious resource, which is a copious resource, which is a copious resource.