

Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History*. Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2003.

In his keynote address to the 1993 International Congress on the Social History of Alcohol, Ian Tyrrell argued for, among other things, more national histories of drink, in order for the field to expand and envelop new areas of interest.¹ Though not at this conference, Craig Heron has taken up Tyrrell's challenge with vigor, and the result is a comprehensive, well-written work that is a tremendous addition to the field of alcohol studies in Canada, and can be a template for similar work elsewhere.

In *Booze: A Distilled History*, Heron argues that alcohol has permeated almost all aspects of Canadian history, and endeavors to trace the role of booze through the history of the northern half of North America. The term "Booze," he explains, carries both derisive and celebratory connotations. Opponents, prohibitionists, evangelicals and other reformers used the term to condemn drinking; drinkers used it as a term of endearment.

But *Booze* is far more than an exercise in etymology. Rather, Heron, a well-established historian of working-class culture in Canada, attempts a determinedly materialist approach to the topic. He jams a range of resources into the 389 pages (before notes), exploring *Booze in Canada* in all its facets. He begins, logically, at the beginning, with the introduction of alcohol to North America through European contact with natives. He explores drinking in early settler life, and the place of drink as the colonies and young nation industrialize. He follows the story through prohibition and its legacy, state control of liquor distribution. The twentieth-century development of research into drinking behavior and the emergence of the concept of alcoholism and the twentieth-century treatment movements round out his discussion. The book ends with a reflection on the patterns he has uncovered, in which he argues that Canadians have created "a diversity of drinking cultures," (382) and it is only through following people into "the culture they were attempting to create

or defend” (383) that we can begin to understand why, when and how people drank.

A massive work of synthesis, it is far more than just a reiteration of what others have written. Indeed, had he done that, it would, given the limits to the Canadian liquor historiography, have been a far slimmer volume. Instead, Heron builds upon extant literature. There are areas in which he did not need to expand significantly, notably in the history of temperance, which has been by far the most expansive topic studied in Canadian liquor history. But there are other areas that have received far too little attention. Booze, in all its dimensions, in twentieth-century Canada is one such field; the nature of various cultures of drinking is another.

If there is one area on which he concentrates his primary research most strongly, it is, not surprisingly, how booze functioned in class relations. For the working class, it was an integral part of social interaction. The tavern was a center of the community, and a center of sociability. Heron uses pictures of tavern life, posters and descriptions from the interior of the tavern, to illustrate the role of the tavern, and to attempt, as others have also recently done, to open the black box of the Canadian tavern. Less accessible are the patterns of consumption among non-working class. This gap is likely because, the working-class tavern became a subject of study of concerned middle-class reformers, and therefore became a site of class struggle, and cultural expression. Apart from some recent work by Julia Roberts on the tavern in Upper Canada, non-working class drinking cultures remain somewhat hidden from historical view.

Yet industrial capitalism also forced drinking to the margins of life, as bourgeois reformers, armed with stories of dissolute drunks destroying their families and themselves, attempted to reduce or eliminate booze from working class social life. Parts of this story of the efforts of temperance reformers has been told by a number of other Canadian historians, including this reviewer, but Heron manages to bring together a range of primary and secondary

documentation to present as near to a complete picture as is possible given the constraints of time and sources.

While it is a nearly comprehensive picture, a close reading will uncover the gaps. In areas where less research has been done, and less is known about the specific situation in Canada, Heron speculates. These passages are replete with terms like “possibly” “probably” and “might,” words that will signal to the reader that the author is filling in the gaps. He does it well, however, Heron draws upon his reading of a vast literature to offer educated guesses. And, perhaps just as Tyrrell had hoped, in the process Heron reveals areas yet to be explored, opening the door to new and diverse scholars to jump in. Rather than problems with the text, therefore, these passages signal future students to pick up on the threads he has identified.

From this reviewer’s perspective, there are two areas of concern, and they are minor ones. First, when discussing the dichotomy between historians of temperance and those of drinking, Heron states that most historians of temperance “share their subjects’ view of the ‘demon rum’”—a statement that makes no sense to me. As a historian of temperance, I cannot help but object, as the numerous real ale splatters on my notes on the WCTU attest. This limited appreciation of the depth of the writing on the temperance movement manifests itself elsewhere, meanwhile, such as when, on page 127, he states that the temperance movement “generally left individual households alone.” The WCTU, for example, had a number of departments dedicated to infiltrating and “uplifting” the working-class home. It is a point that, while possibly minor, suggests general problems with overarching works of synthesis: the tendency for generalizations to blur the nuances. One other concern, and this is almost comical, is Heron’s perhaps overly enthusiastic tendency to interpret photographs. He has himself since admitted that it may not have been a trough to carry away urine sitting at the foot of the bar pictured on page 116. I would suggest also that, considering all of the drawings and photos of men grasping the neck of large, foaming beer bottles, sometimes a

bottle is just a bottle. (The cover photo, of a brewers advertisement in which a Victorian woman cradles an oversized, foaming beer bottle protruding from her crotch, may be a clear exception.)

In all, *Booze: A Distilled History* is a tremendous achievement. Not only does it offer a synthesis from most of the secondary literature on the topic in Canada, and roots it firmly in an international context, but it also offers extensive primary research to fill in many of the gaps. It is essential reading for anyone studying liquor in Canadian history, studying cultural history in general, and I might add, it would reward readers studying other national contexts. By drawing together diverse resources, and looking at overarching patterns, cultural expressions, economic situations and political forces, Heron has presented a work that will demonstrate to many the relevance of and possibilities for the field of alcohol studies.

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NOTE

¹ Tyrrell's address is reproduced as "Tasks and Achievements of Alcohol and Temperance Historiography," in Blocker and Warsh, *The Changing Face of Drink: Substance, Imagery and Behaviour* (Ottawa: Les Publications *Historie Sociale/Social History*, 1997): 381-399.

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