

*Back, Little Sheba* (1952) examined the alcoholic marriage within the context of a desolate and disappointing suburban existence.

By the 1960s, civil rights, feminism, and the counter culture challenged conventions of race, class, and gender and are worthy topics for a second book from this author. As part of the Gender and American Culture Series published by University of North Carolina, *Love on The Rocks* fills a much-needed gap in alcohol studies within the context of broader twentieth century issues. The idea that gender formation is an historic process by which the two genders are formed and reformed is one of the most compelling points of the book; the intimate link between gender formation and the history of drinking is its most provocative insight.

BARBARA KANTZ, SUNY EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE  
Barbara.Kantz@esc.edu

Dempsey, Hugh A., *Firewater: The Impact of the Whisky Trade on the Blackfoot Nation*. Calgary: Fifth House, 2000.

Hugh A. Dempsey's *Firewater: The Impact of the Whisky Trade on the Blackfoot Nation* is a history of the most intensive and unfortunate Blackfoot encounter with "white man's water," with a narrative structure that rides through like a classic western. It begins with the departure of the old "sheriff" - the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) - and the transfer of territorial control to the fledgling Dominion of Canada in 1869. The HBC had been largely responsible for maintaining a semblance of control over whisky in the Great Plains north of the forty-ninth parallel. However, before a new "sheriff" could be appointed, in rode a gang of black hats under the long-arm control of Thomas C. Powers and company.

The outlaws whom Powers supplies with whisky ride into the power vacuum created by the HBC's departure, setting up forts and trade posts throughout the Whoop Up country in what was formerly British territory. As they do so, they outwit and

outmanoeuvre many an Indian agent, sheriff, and institution of the United States government who seek to bring them to justice for crimes in their own jurisdiction. Meanwhile the outlaws are aided by the conflicting political interests of the American political hierarchy. The problems that the outlaws bring culminate in a series of gunfights and massacres such as those at Oldman River and Cypress Hills. These problems finally prompt the introduction of a new “sheriff” to police the formerly more peaceful plains, the Northwest Mounted Police (NWMP). Like a good and stereotypical Mountie would, the NWMP do get their man, and a new sheriff on the American side of the forty-ninth eventually meets with similar results. By 1875, half a decade after the illicit whisky trade takes over the Whoop Up, the Mounties have instilled a sense of control over the region and saved the Blackfoot people from the destruction that seemed imminent at the hands of the Montanan traders.

The tale is as exciting and action-packed as one would expect from a western. Dempsey’s extensive knowledge, culled over thirty years of archival research and personal interviews, brings to light numerous colorful personalities to excite and interest the reader such as John Healy, John “Liver Eating” Johnson, and Alfred H. “Dutch Fred” Wachter. Dempsey’s ability to weave such a tapestry of characters together while maintaining the flow of his argument is notably successful.

The fairly straightforward argument put forth in *Firewater* is that the whisky trade between 1869 and 1874 radically decimated the Blackfoot nation to such an extent that they were unable to resist encroachments on their traditional territories. These encroachments included the violent invasions of the neighboring Cree and Assiniboine tribes as well as the pressure to sign a treaty with the Canadian government that may have been less than favourable to the Blackfoot people. Dempsey lays the blame for the extent to which the whisky trade was allowed to propagate itself on two primary causes: the capitalistic drive of Thomas Power and John A. Macdonald’s delay in providing a police presence to

uphold prairie law. Dempsey's evidence in support of such claims demonstrates a clear connection between each of these causes and the proliferation of the trade.

Power's depot at Fort Benton supplied traders' needs so that they could carry out the trade for buffalo robes. These needs included transportation to bring in illicit goods such as whisky. It also included the political connections and savvy to sustain the business in the face of legal opposition. Dempsey's argument for the Canadian government's impact is more derivative. It is based on the fact that when the Canadian government offered no presence in the Whoop Up country, the trade thrived, but when the rumors and reports of the arrival of the NWMP began the trade in whisky dried up, traders retreated to Montana, and those who remained moved towards more legitimate forms of trade. Therefore, Dempsey's claim is entirely plausible that if the Canadian government had made its presence felt sooner, the trade would not have been allowed to develop as it did with such disastrous consequences for the Blackfoot.

Unfortunately, Dempsey's analysis of the situation only provides a partial discussion of the causes and does not fully investigate the roots of the problem. The traders themselves and their ability to access the southern Alberta tribes, the impotence of the American government to stymie traders, and the conflicts between Democratic Montana and the Republican U.S. federal government are significantly underemphasized. According to the evidence that Dempsey presents, had partisan conflicts between the federal and state levels of government been remedied earlier and they co-operated more fully, Whoop Up country may never have existed.

Since some blame lays on the Canadian government, Dempsey is correct that if there was a police or military presence by 1872 or 1873, the trade may not have been as detrimental to the Blackfoot as it was. But this argument may oversimplify the situation slightly. It would have taken little consideration, and little of the book's space, to acknowledge that there may have been competing interests for

Macdonald's attention and the resources he and his government commanded. Little attention is given to potential drains on resources or changes in attitudes that the Northwest Rebellion may have had during the period of the whisky trade toward maintaining peace and authority afterwards. This may also include the Canadian government's desire to secure treaties with the natives of the prairie before being militarily present in order to prevent future difficulties, such as those experienced at Red River, a process not completed until 1877.

The final aspect of blame that Dempsey patently refuses to acknowledge is any responsibility on the part of the Blackfoot. In his conclusion he definitively states that the Blackfoot were "guiltless". This approach to the matter assumes that the Blackfoot were passive participants who lacked the agency to prevent the trade in whisky. The rationale provided is that the Blackfoot were excessive by nature due to their nomadic lifestyle. With their increased and immediate access to whisky through the traders, the Blackfoot's excess spiralled out of control. This explanation does not adequately account for how the Blackfoot allowed consumption to get out of hand. A more in-depth examination and analysis of Blackfoot politics and culture are necessary to explain how the inherent characteristics of this society made an adequate and prompt response to the problem impossible without the assistance of outsiders. In addition, too little emphasis is placed on the devastating effects of smallpox on this society. Thus, a socio-political discussion of the impacts of earlier epidemics on Blackfoot agency during the whisky trade and after would give a more complete picture of the effects of the whisky trade.

Had Dempsey included such considerations in *Firewater*, he may not have been able to maintain the narrative flow that makes his book so digestible. However, the approach leaves numerous questions unanswered and the picture incomplete. Despite this, Dempsey does provide valuable insights into the trade and its complexity,

providing a foundation for future studies of a trade that devastated and nearly destroyed a culture for the sake of a dollar.

DONALD R. BENNIE, HAMILTON, ONTARIO  
don\_bennie@hotmail.com

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