



Drink: A Social History of America

By Andrew Barr

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Drink: A Social History of America By Andrew Barr

In this shrewd cultural history of drink in America, Andrew Barr considers the significance of alcohol, historically and socially, symbolic and real, in the evolution of a nation born of a rebel spirit and intoxicated by liberty - and sometimes by rum or raw whiskey, which the colonists preferred to their royally taxed British tea. While Americans have both asserted and celebrated their freedoms with alcohol they have also, in Barr's perceptive historical view, put it to more insidious use; in suppressing native American populations in the country's expansion west, for instance, or in controlling acculturation of immigrants. Blending his candidly opinionated take on history with a lively bit of cultural anthropology, Barr examines not only the social influences that determine what, where, and why we choose to drink but also the social ills that have been attributed to alcohol, from the supposed decline in national values to the dipsomaniacal state of our national health. Barr argues, however, that the scapegoating of alcohol by moral alarmists, the medical establishment, and platform politicians has more often produced dubious cures and moral hypocrisy than it has accomplished social good.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

"It is not generally appreciated how extreme American attitudes about alcohol appear from the other side of the Atlantic."

With an opening line such as that, it's not surprising that *Drink: A Social History of America* engages in its share of Yankee-bashing. British journalist Andrew Barr's look at American culture through a glass (somewhat blearily) is an attempt "to understand the history of the United States through its attitudes to liquor and its changing tastes in drink." In reality, however, Barr lurches and staggers from topic to topic--from prohibition to martinis to ice to air conditioning to bland American beer in one 10-page sample--in this swirling cocktail party of a book. That's not to say that Barr's book isn't enjoyable--in fact, it's often delightful. Barr serves up amusing stories (such as that of poor King Charles II of Navarre, immolated in an alcohol-soaked sheet), interesting factoids (the first grapevines in California were planted at the San Juan Capistrano mission in 1779), and strong opinions. Some of his opinions are funny, some are bound to raise hackles (that alcoholism is not a disease, but a "failure of personality," for example), while others are somewhat sensible but destined to be unpopular. Barr feels that Americans have an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, so we should teach young people (and those who drink to excess) to drink sensibly, worry less about pregnant women having the occasional drink and more about prenatal care, and switch the focus from stricter drunk-driving laws to laws aimed at reducing dangers such as cell-phone use and road rage. Just when things get too serious, however, Barr is off again in another direction with another witty snippet. Unfortunately, like many partygoers, Barr tends to repeat himself--frequent footnotes direct the reader to "See Chapter 4," "See Chapter 4 again," or even "See Chapter 4 once more." Perfect for browsing or ingesting in small doses, too much *Drink* in one sitting may leave readers with a headache. --C.B. Delaney

From Publishers Weekly

The main point of this cheerful mixture of polemic and cultural history is that Americans are both bad drunks and bad tee-totalers. London Sunday Times journalist Barr (Wine Snobbery, a social history of drink in Great Britain) makes entertaining work of tracing how alcohol has been intertwined with American history. Ever since European immigrants got Native Americans drunk in order to fleece them of their land and goods, booze has been a lubricant of American expansion and growth. During the American Revolution, alcohol became a symbol of independence (thanks to British attempts to tax molasses and Madeira), and rebels plotted resistance to the crown in New England taverns. Prohibition, in Barr's view, reflected a wider cultural conflict in which native-born WASPs attacked immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, viewing their custom of drinking at meals as symptomatic of sloth. "In its view of liquor, America is out of step with the rest of the Western world," chides Barr, arguing that Americans have never outgrown their tendency to oscillate between binge drinking and abstinence, between debauch and ineffectual puritanism. Barr further argues that alcoholism is not a disease but a failure of personality. And while he acknowledges that strict law enforcement and campaigns like Mothers Against Drunk Drivers have contributed to a decline in drunk-driving auto accidents, he opposes setting the minimum drinking age at 21. While his arguments may nettle or infuriate, his opinionated chronicle is briskly engaging and full of wondrous lore on Americans' eating and drinking habits. Eight-pages of b&w photos. QPB selection.

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From Library Journal

Barr employs the fields of history, cultural anthropology, pharmacology, religion, economics, nutrition, law,

technology, and psychology in his consideration of alcohol consumption in the United States. A Sunday Times writer in London, Barr (Wine Snobbery: An Expos?, S. & S., 1992. o.p.) brings a unique perspective and biting satirical commentary to his work. His approach is thematic rather than narrative, with chapters on conflicting attitudes toward drink and drugs, the Americanization of European drinking habits, the utter failure of governmental authorities to control alcohol traffic effectively, and the many vogues of social drinking from the 19th-century workingman's saloon to today's yuppie clubs. Barr discounts the notion that alcoholism is a disease. He chides Alcoholics Anonymous for its outmoded precepts of uplift and teetotalism and criticizes Mothers Against Drunk Drivers for pursuing the bogus issues of a minimum driving age and a ridiculously low blood alcohol content standard. While the book is thought-provoking and impressively researched, Barr's polemical digressions are too numerous and too long, his proffered solutions to America's problems unconvincing or downright "over the top," and his lack of an overarching historical narrative makes for an uneven and laborious read. Recommended for larger public and academic libraries. A John Carver Edwards, Univ. of Georgia Libs., Athens
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