



Fall 1980

W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*

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Recommended Citation

Siff, Paul (1980) "W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol1/iss1/3>

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W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 302 pp. \$14.95.

Review by Paul Siff

The use and abuse of alcohol continues to animate concern in the United States, as the current worry over childhood drinking clearly illustrates. Preoccupation with demon rum is of course nothing new in American life, yet most Americans are ignorant of drinking's place in the national past. Thus they have little against which to measure the current situation, and their understanding of it suffers thereby. Yet the ordinary citizen ought not to bear the blame for this state of affairs; the historical profession has been derelict of duty. Most historians who have written about drinking have concentrated on the various crusades against intoxicating beverages rather than on the functional role of alcohol within the national culture.

W.J. Rorabaugh of the University of Washington has remedied this problem in his significant study of alcoholic consumption and drinking patterns in the United States during the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. The time period is important to the subject: between 1800 and 1830 American imbibers drank more alcohol per capita, especially distilled spirits, than at any time before or since. Indeed the per capita consumption of spirits in 1830 was nearly three times that for 1975, and the overall consumption of all intoxicants nearly twice. Yet after 1830 Americans seemed to embark upon quite the contrary binge, that of abstinence; consumption of strong drink plummeted in the middle of the century, and though recently rising, has remained relatively low ever since.

Rorabaugh's study fulfils the historian's chief obligations: first, to describe what occurred by reconstructing an aspect of the past; second, to explain why it occurred by demonstrating causal links among described phenomena; and finally, to deal with the ultimate question of significance. In addressing the last, Rorabaugh stakes his greatest claim to originality. To him, the magnitude and type of alcoholic beverages consumed, and the manner and circumstances in

which they were taken, provide clues to basic shifts in American cultural development, particularly in the value-systems and socio-psychological makeup of Americans in the early nineteenth century. He posits nothing less than a fundamental shift in national character between 1790 and 1840. To thus interpret his evidence, Rorabaugh has relied upon social-science studies of drinking mores in various cultures. And as he admits, a number of his conclusions are "more suggestive than rigorously proved." Indeed, as we shall see, this is so.

Rorabaugh pictures early nineteenth century America as "A Nation of Drunkards," or at least one of "hearty, not to say excessive" imbibers. Drinking, he claims, crossed socio-economic, occupational, sexual, age, and racial boundaries. Americans drank at home, in taverns, on steamboats and during stagecoach stops, when concluding business deals, and in courtrooms while conducting trials. Further, they were likely to tip their glasses at any time during the waking day. Rorabaugh's evidence to this effect is voluminous, but derives heavily from temperance literature and travel accounts. Neither the temperance advocates nor the foreign travelers of this time were unbiased or understated witnesses. Indeed, one need only look at today's newspaper accounts of social trends and fads, which often proclaim that "everyone" is doing them, to see how cautious the historian must be in using contemporary observation.

Nevertheless, early nineteenth-century heavy drinking was widespread, and whiskey had become the preferred beverage, eclipsing such colonial favorites as rum and eventually hard cider. Why was this so? Rorabaugh links whiskey's rise to its cheapness and abundance, a function of grain overproduction and an inadequate distribution system. Both of these, in conjunction with new distilling methods, encouraged heavy whiskey output by local, small-scale producers. Thus whiskey, untaxed at the time, was cheap enough to constitute a bargain. Other beverages, alcoholic or not, were either more expensive, unpalatable, or even possibly dangerous. And Americans, heavily committed to a diet dependent upon salted pork, corn, and, thanks to the predominance of frying, grease, drank whiskey as a culinary grease-cutter. They also believed it aided digestion at a time when "chronic dyspepsia" was a common complaint.

Ultimately, however, Rorabaugh believes that cultural and psychological changes within American society underlay its early nineteenth-century spree. "Those groups most severely affected by change," he asserts, "were also the groups most given to heavy drinking." Farmhands increasingly unable to purchase their own land, factory workers caught in a dull regimen, skilled journeymen robbed by the factory system of their dreams of independence and self-respect, rootless lumberjacks, stagecoach drivers, and boatmen, all drank excessively, Rorabaugh claims, and did so to obliterate their disappointments. But so too did physicians, lawyers, and clergymen, as a collapsing social hierarchy devalued their traditional status. However even a rise in status, he also alleges, could produce the same effect; newly-rich southern planters, bored by their ostentatiously idle lives, were another reportedly bibulous group. Indeed, only northern yeoman farmers, in Rorabaugh's opinion, led lives fulfilling enough to avoid alcoholic excess. In addition, he believes, the post-Revolutionary generation, coming of age around 1800, was particularly under stress and thus given to drink because the ideals they had absorbed as children were not embodied in social reality. One such young man, he suggests, may have turned to drink because he "had no idealism"[!] Here Rorabaugh seems carried beyond prudent scholarship by his passion for making a point. And his general observations on the drinking patterns of occupational groups are not buttressed, in this reviewer's opinion, by adequate evidence. At one point he includes journeymen as one of the negatively affected groups; later in the same chapter they are characterized as relative exemplars of class-conscious activity, organizing unions and political parties, and publishing periodicals. Presumably, this would have lessened their need to drink. Also, Rorabaugh's positive characterization of independent farmers is rather romanticized. In fact, one recent book, Thomas Dublin's *Women At Work*, argues convincingly that young female operatives in the New England textile mills consciously preferred the financial rewards and urban excitement of factory-town life to the grinding dullness and isolation of the family farm.

Lastly, Rorabaugh considers the ways in which Americans drank. By the 1820's the colonial pattern of taking small drams throughout the day gave way to communal intoxication and, more

ominously, the solitary binge accompanied by the horrors of *delirium tremens*. At this point Rorabaugh applies social-psychological theories and studies of drinking in other societies to his historical evidence. Until the 1830's, he hypothesizes, Americans aspired to fulfill the ideals of their Revolution and the economic promise held out by their society. But their motivation was low, he speculates, extrapolating this judgment from social-science studies. Hence, and in line with their exaltation of the independent individual, Americans solitarily drowned their resultant anxieties and guilt in drink. Rorabaugh's explanation of how this crisis was resolved is intriguing and audacious. He suggests that a new, highly motivated generation appeared, one which spurned the Revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality "as impractical abstractions" and instead busied itself with the attainable goal of industrial growth. Its members actually turned against drink, their crusade aided by the transportation revolution which enabled more efficient distribution of grain and lessened the proportion of it being turned into liquor, and by concentration in the distilling industry. The latter transformed distillers into large-scale, distant enterprises, rather than small, local ones, and thus rendered them more palatable targets for temperance propaganda. Rapid industrialization, Rorabaugh contends (with scant evidence), was stimulated by expenditure shifts away from the purchase of hard liquor. In fact he sees nineteenth-century temperance as the crucial link between two halves of a new American ethos — a combination of capitalist rationality and Christian evangelism — both of which demanded banishment of the demon rum. The temperance ideal, he concludes, was the "grease" that lubricated the machinery of American society before the Great Crash destroyed both the capitalist Old Order and the Noble Experiment of Prohibition. The country was then left once again adrift between ideals and reality.

The Alcoholic Republic is by turns fascinating in detail, rich with suggestive insights, and exasperating in its bold but lightly documented grand assertions. The author has a penchant for using the word "Americans," but in a country ethnically and socio-economically diverse even 150 years ago, just what does he mean? He also ignores the recent perspective which sees alcoholism as a disease and which has established an hereditary factor in its

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transmission. Such a view, if valid, would necessarily modify a cultural interpretation of drinking. While *The American Republic* is by no means a perfect monograph, it is a gracefully written and stimulating work that will profit the general reader as well as the historical specialist.