

BOOK REVIEW

*David Beckingham*¹

Henry Yeomans, *Alcohol and Moral Regulation: Public Attitudes, Spirited Measures and Victorian Hangovers*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2014 pp. vii, 279, £56, ISBN 978-1-447-30993-2.

Henry Yeomans' enjoyable book offers an important perspective on Britain's historical relationship with alcohol. It is not so much the consumption of alcohol that attracts Yeomans' attention, as the way we think about it. Nodding to Foucault, Yeomans presents a genealogy of the drink problem taking in the rise of temperance as a matter of individual choice at the beginning of the nineteenth century, later parliamentary debates that set the limits of state intervention, which would be tested by the World Wars, and, finally, the rise of the night-time economy and licensing reform of recent decades. His evidence comes from keyword searches of digital databases, and Yeomans usefully includes his search terms in the endnotes. Setting aside the issue of the accuracy of the technology, the results collected seem up to the task at hand, allowing Yeomans to survey a range of attitudes from the different periods in question. If I have a note of caution it is that some of the names mentioned in the results might be unfamiliar to some readers. Yeomans does not always explain who they are, for example, though it is worth stating that it is their views that are of value. What links these, he says, is the Victorian hangover of the title, a particular framing of alcohol consumption. To play on that theme, it is worth remembering that there were different kinds of consumption, different ways of getting and even being drunk, and different arguments against alcohol. Yet today's assessment of the problem of alcohol, Yeomans suggests, is strongly influenced by a historical construction of consumption as a question of moral regulation.

Accepting this relies, in part, on Yeomans' corrections to uncritical readings of Victorian temperance. He is surely right to remind us that we cannot judge that movement solely on its inability to deliver prohibition. Rather, it is noteworthy that the

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drink question retained such a high parliamentary profile for so long. Beyond Westminster, temperance transformed many individual lives. As research by Annemarie McAllister and others makes clear, those who committed themselves to the cause sought nothing short of personal re-creation. Yeomans links this particular quest to a Foucauldian ethics of self, reminding us that the history of the drink problem cannot be written entirely from Hansard's record of parliamentary debates. As such we cannot look solely for the passage of this or that law, or assume that the absence of prohibition somehow renders the temperance movement little more than a Victorian curiosity. Moreover, this turn from formal politics also opens another question as to how we read the introduction of legal regulation more generally, notably whether legislation tended to provoke or follow public opinion.

Yeomans includes three signal legislative moments: the Licensing Act 1872, the operation of the Central Control Board (CCB) in the Great War and the Licensing Act 2003. Each measure can be read as a landmark, but from his theoretical perspective Yeomans prefers to identify their continuities. In addition to looking at the compromise that was the 1872 Act, a point that is only reinforced when we remember it was a revised version of an 1871 Bill, Yeomans makes a good case for seeing some wartime interventions as perhaps less innovative than might be imagined. In some areas, the regulation of alcohol rather followed existing patterns, while consumption, at any rate, continued its early-century fall. His reading of 2003 also merits attention. Though widely reported as a dramatic liberalising measure – recall those scare stories about 24-hour binge drinking – Yeomans uses evidence from Hadfield and Measham's 2010 study in *Criminology and Public Policy* that shows that the average extension of licensing hours on Saturdays since the Act had been just 21 minutes while only 1 percent of pubs had applied to extend their hours beyond midnight to argue that its effects have not always matched predictions. Secondly, and even more significantly, the period has seen the introduction of associated measures that are more draconian than might be imagined. Such measures are not inconsistent with a liberal will to govern, precisely because they are the means by which liberal freedoms can be delivered to the responsible majority. Yeomans makes the important point that as Foucauldian 'dividing' practices these measures play a central role in normalizing so-called responsible drinking (p.189). And here there is a separate theoretical contribution that emerges: we cannot understand changing cultures of consumption simply through the law. Rather, we should ask how such state urges to regulate variously contradict or correspond to the agendas of different groups in society.

It is Yeomans' contention that today's debate, heavily influenced by population-level concerns of public health advocacy, has inherited its framing from that branch of the Victorian temperance movement that ultimately realised moral suasion would not alone deliver society from the problems associated with alcohol consumption. Now, it is important to stress that there is no need to assume a kind of inevitable, teleological narrative here. Indeed, we should not overlook how within each generation groups might be defining a different alcohol problem, notably with regard to the relationship between public order and public health. The author's point, however, is that although these definitions may vary they have tended to start from a similar moral standpoint. That earlier framing, Yeomans suggests, constitutes more than simply a historical parallel; past beliefs and values, he concludes, 'continue to construct contemporary attitudes and forms of governance' (p.248).

Appreciating the plurality of historical positions actually reinforces a vital point that there are other possible framings for debates about alcohol. While Yeomans is quiet on the form these might take, he contends that policymakers must be mindful that they operate, in large part, within an inherited reading of the problem that they seek to control. Those who write about drink are cautioned against reading as moral certainties what Yeomans contends are historically contingent constructions.