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Collecting to the Core — Commodity and Alcohol Studies in World History

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**Column Editor’s Note:** The “Collecting to the Core” column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the Resources for College Libraries bibliography (online at http://www.rclweb.net). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

What did you eat for breakfast? Coffee, milk, tea, orange juice, bread, butter, eggs? These grown products are commonly considered soft commodities; while mined resources like gold and petroleum are labeled hard commodities. Commodity histories provide a convenient way to explore world history, as studies into the production, exchange, and consumption of goods can help illustrate the complex economic, social, cultural, ecological, political, and transnational transformations of people and places.¹ For those interested in the genre of commodity histories, an accessible introduction is that by the prolific journalist Mark Kurlansky, Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World.² Unlike most of those who write about commodities for a popular audience, Kurlansky is interested in producers as well as consumers, in this instance, fishers and buyers of fish. Commodity histories seldom offer theory; the few that do often use a Marxist framework. Here are some examples: In 1985 cultural anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz wrote what may be the most influential commodity history, Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History.³ Mexican anthropologist Arturo Warman published a thoughtful history of maize in 1988 that Nancy L. Westrate later translated into English as Corn and Capitalism: How a Botanical Bastard Grew to Global Domination.⁴ More recently, the economic historian Sven Beckert published Empire of Cotton: A Global History, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and was awarded the Bancroft Prize.⁵ Commodity histories often claim to be world histories and may flaunt an over-the-top subtitle such as the otherwise admirable book by Markman Ellis, Richard Coulton, and Matthew Mauger, Empire of Tea: The Asian Leaf That Conquered the World.⁶ In Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World, David T. Courtwright provides a broad look at the global history — geographically and temporally — of the “big three” drugs (alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine), which today are mass produced and largely legal, as well as the illegal “little three” (opiates, cannabis, and cocaine).⁷

Alcoholic drinks are at the edge of the standard definition of commodities, since they do not have a standard price that prevails internationally. They vary much more drastically in price than, say, kinds of crude oil. Despite this distinction, historians definitely study alcoholic beverages within the history of commodities.

Reaktion Books’ “Edible” series publishes an array of short commodity histories, from bread to water, all with the subtitle “a global history.” The “Edible” series includes volumes about virtually every alcoholic beverage consumed just by being himself to convey faith to you, and understanding sympathy, and friendship. Many men can teach but only a fine, rare few can be in themselves an education in faith for others! But I am a clumsy writer indeed when it comes to anything but dialogue, and I was afraid my word had bungled expressing any of this. However, now that I know you found worth in what I wrote, that’s all I care about.

Again, my deepest sympathy — and, always, all good wishes to you. Cordially yours, Eugene O’Neill”¹²

For 1936, there are eleven letters included in the chapter entitled “Laureate, 1931-1936” for the reader’s enjoyment. Six of them refer to the Nobel Prize. There are references to hectic days, “dodging the radio and newsreel baloney,” delight in hearing from old friends, and enjoying congratulatory notes. One letter is to James E. Brown, Jr., the third secretary of the American embassy in Stockholm, Sweden that includes the speech he prepared: “Enclosed you will find the speech you suggested. I have never been a guest of honor, or made a speech in my life, and I’ve only written about two of them before this, but I hope this one is adequate.” O’Neill did not attend the award ceremony.

Long Day’s Journey into Night premiered in Sweden in February 1956, opened on Broadway in November 1956, and won a Tony Award for best play. The script was a gift: “For Carlotta, on our 12th Wedding Anniversary. Dearest: I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood. A sadly inappropriate gift, it would seem, for a day celebrating happiness. But you will understand. I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play — write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones. These twelve years, Beloved One, have been a Journey into Light — into love. You know my gratitude. And my love! Gene. Tao House. July 22, 1941.”¹³

wife Carlotta Monterey O’Neill; first publication in February 1956; copyright renewed by Yale University 1984; corrected edition copyright by Yale University 1989; Harold Bloom’s Forward copyright 1987; first published as a Yale Nota Bene book 2002. In 1899, the play was in its sixty-first printing.

To review, I was hesitant about reading a play. But it didn’t take me long before I was lost in the journey of that day which began in the living room of the Tyrones’ summer home in 1912. In one afternoon I quickly advanced through the four acts and came to midnight. A fluid and natural read, albeit a dramatic one, of a family in turmoil. Addic-
in Western Europe and the United States such as beer, brandy, champagne, cocktails, gin, rum, tequila, whiskey, wine, and vodka. In 2012, Gina Hames produced a pioneering work of synthesis, *Alcohol in World History*. She brought the perspective of a Latin Americanist to this laudable project, although as a very short book intended for undergraduates, her work unsurprisingly slights topics that many other scholars find important. The work provides thoughtful analysis of the production, trade, consumption, and regulation of alcoholic drink, and relates alcohol to class and gender, religion and ethnicity, Western colonialism, and industrialization. It also addresses how drink can enhance sociability while alternatingly producing disorder and ill health.

Recent reference publications underscore that historians, sociologists, and other scholars are focusing research attention on alcohol studies. They include *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History; Alcohol in Popular Culture: An Encyclopedia; Alcohol and Drugs in North America: A Historical Encyclopedia; and The SAGE Encyclopedia of Alcohol: Social, Cultural, and Historical Perspectives*. There is an abundance of books about the history of alcohol, although they are unevenly distributed among geographic regions. To learn more about alcohol’s archaeological origins and early history, the best guide is *Patrick E. McGovern’s Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer, and Other Alcoholic Beverages*. There are few English-language books about drink for Africa and even fewer for Asia and Latin America. An exception is *Alcohol in Latin America: A Social and Cultural History*, edited by Gretchen Pierce and Aurea Toxqui, which is most strong for its discussion of Mexico.

The remainder of this essay focuses on a single title, the Canadian historian Rod Phillips’ 2014 work, *Alcohol: A History*. Originally the University of North Carolina Press listed it as a world history of alcohol. The more modest title of the book, as published, reflects its focus on Europe and countries of European settlement. Phillips began his career as a historian of early modern France and, as a wine enthusiast, shifted his scholarly interests to the history of wine. Between 2001 and 2016 he published a general history of wine and specialized wine histories for Ontario, Canada and France. Phillips is more ambitious in *Alcohol: A History*, which looks at a variety of alcoholic drinks over the course of many centuries in Europe and its colonial settlements. For most people alcohol was part of daily life. It also was feared as endangering private morality and public order. Consequently, it was regulated more than any other commodity. After alcohol was banned in prohibition, it is today almost always legal outside Islamic countries and a few Indian provinces. The modern status of alcohol contrasts with that of illegal drugs like opioids, cocaine, and marijuana (although recent legislation to decriminalize and legalize medical and recreational use of the latter in the U.S. is a shift of note).

Although he traces the production of alcoholic drink to northeastern China thousands of years ago, Phillips focuses on the West, or what used to be called Western Civilization. *Phillips* hits his stride in the second chapter on the wine-drinking societies of ancient Greece and Rome. In later chapters he addresses the relationship between alcohol and religious practice. The Christian Eucharist combined bread and wine. In contrast, Muslims rejected alcohol (an Arabic word in origin). In the Middle Ages beer became a common drink, and making and selling it an important business. Alcohol fashions change frequently, but wine has always remained the prestige drink. For the post-medieval world Phillips provides chapters on many controversies. Distilled spirits, originally a medication, became a popular and highly intoxicating alternative to wine and beer. Spirits aggrandized elite concerns over lower-class drinking. European racism made the introduction of alcohol in non-European societies contentious. Women had always drunk, although usually less than men. Perhaps because of mistreatment by drunken men, women played a large role in temperance reform during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially in the United States, though in the twenty-first century women rival men as drinkers. Phillips speculates that we may have entered a post-alcohol age as consumption of alcohol has fallen in many countries, with rivals including soft drinks and drugs.

Along with many of the commodity histories discussed above, *Phillips’ Alcohol: A History* deserves a place at all academic and public libraries. No book with such a vast scope could avoid errors of omission and commission, but it immediately has been recognized as a standard work on the cultural history of alcohol. It can be considered a preview of the forthcoming six-volume work for which Phillips is the general editor, *A Cultural History of Alcohol*. 

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**Endnotes**


*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.*