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

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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 1989, 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. Addition, illness, frugality, and irresponsibility are all presented with brutal honesty and brilliant dialogue in this autobiographical play. The reader becomes a voyeur to a family in crisis and can't step away.

Dialogue was **O'Neill's** strong suit and his affection and ability for writing dialogue is self described in a letter dated January 20, 1935 penned while at his home: Casa Genotta, Sea Island, Georgia. **O'Neill** had written a tribute to **Professor George Pierce Baker** that appeared in the *New York Times* seven days after **Baker's** death. **Baker's** wife must have written a note of appreciation to which **O'Neill** responded:

"Dear Mrs. Baker: Your kind letter took a great load off my mind. Ever since I sent that to the Times', I've been laboring under a guilty feeling that it was unforgivably inadequate. I did try hard to make it a message of my very deep feeling of gratitude and sadness, and emphasize the greatest gift one human being can give another — the courage to believe in his work and go on — a gift which Mr. Baker gave to me, as he did to so many others. What I will always remember first about him is not the teacher but the man, the charm of his personality, his ability

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"

For 1936, there are eleven letters included in the chapter entitled "Laureate, 1931-1936" for the reader's enjoyment. Six of them reference 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." 🌸

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

by **David M. Fahey** (Professor Emeritus of History, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio; World and Comparative History Editor, *Resources for College Libraries*) <faheydm@gmail.com>

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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 Dominance*.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



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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*.⁸ 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 alternately 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*.⁹⁻¹² 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*.¹³ 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 **Áurea Toxqui**, which is most strong for its discussion of Mexico.¹⁴ There are a fair number of English-language books for France, Germany, and Russia. Predictably, Britain has many more books, as for instance, **Paul Jennings'** *A History of Drink and the English, 1500-2000*.¹⁵ *Public Drinking in the Early Modern World: Voices from the Tavern, 1500-1800* is a notable multivolume collection of primary documents for which **Thomas E. Brennan** served as general editor.¹⁶ Books about drink and sobriety in the United States are innumerable. A few are broad in scope, such as **Christine Sismondo**, *America Walks into a Bar: A Spirited History of Taverns and Saloons, Speakeasies, and Grog Shops*, but the best usually are more narrow, as for instance, **Daniel Okrent**, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*.¹⁷⁻¹⁸

The remainder of this essay focuses on a single title, the Canadian historian **Rod Phillips'** 2014 work, *Alcohol: A History*.¹⁹ 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 abortive experiments 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 aggravated 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*.²⁰ 🌿

Endnotes

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