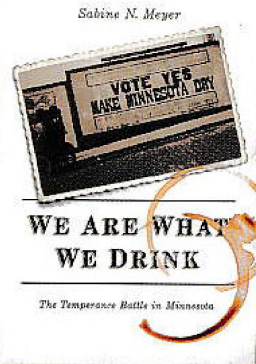


BOOK REVIEW

We Are What We Drink: The Temperance Battle in Minnesota

Sabine N. Meyer

(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015, 288 p., Cloth, \$55.00.)



A self-described “beer-drinking German,” Sabine Meyer became interested in Minnesota’s temperance movement as a graduate exchange student at the University of Minnesota. What, she wanted to know, had St. Paul’s German American community made of the temperance movement in the century leading up to Prohibition in 1919? Meyer, now a professor of American studies at the University of Osnabrück in Germany, has done extensive research that has resulted in *We Are What We Drink: The Temperance Battle in Minnesota*, a fascinating volume that explores temperance through multiple lenses of ethnicity, gender, class, religion, and place.

One of Meyer’s contributions is to show that no uniform, national story of temperance exists. Rather, the narratives are local and regional. She focuses on Minnesota for its influential women’s temperance movement, its diversity of religious denominations, and its sizable immigrant communities. St. Paul is of interest because its history, identity, and economy were intertwined with alcohol production and consumption. The whiskey trade was central to its founding, and a “vice” economy developed to compensate for the lack of other industries. With the active support of those in power, St. Paul positioned itself as an anti-temperance city, with opposition to temperance becoming an integral part of what it meant to be a St. Paulite.

While histories of the temperance movement have typically treated it as a moral crusade by middle-class Protestants, *We Are What We Drink* challenges that notion. Through meticulous examination of primary sources—mainstream newspapers, the ethnic press, diaries, letters, city histories, political cartoons, speeches, and civic documents—Meyer demonstrates that a number of shifting agendas were at play. German immigrants were among the strongest temperance resisters, while the Irish were strategic supporters. A uniquely German American identity had formed around sociability, relaxation, and music, with beer a core component. Beer was central, too, to their livelihood, with Germans owning and working in the breweries. Consequently, Germans viewed temperance campaigns as attacks on their culture, incomes, and personal liberty, a stance that Meyer shows became hard to maintain only with the onset of World War I.

In contrast, Minnesota’s Irish immigrants, at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder at the time, were intent on improv-

ing their social standing. Supporting temperance became a strategy for achieving respectability; a means to an end that once achieved led to diminished activism.

While from today’s perspective the fight to prohibit alcohol appears repressive, Meyer argues that women’s temperance activism had a strong progressive element. Participation and leadership in the movement removed women from the private sphere of home, bringing them into the public sphere as speakers, lobbyists, and agitators, laying “the groundwork for the emergence of a female consciousness, solidarity, self-confidence, and expertise.” Here is where temperance activism intersected with the campaign for women’s suffrage, which in 1920 resulted in ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote. By linking the movements, *We Are What We Drink* serves as a corrective to prior scholarship depicting temperance and suffrage activism as diametrically opposed.

Meyer sees an emphatic difference between St. Paul and reform-minded Minneapolis, which jumped on the temperance bandwagon. She illustrates how their different founding histories, civic identities, demographics, and economic structures led to divergent responses to temperance. With the exception of one St. Paul residential enclave, Midway—conceived as a village for wealthy businessmen and white-collar workers—the capital city resisted temperance at every turn.

Like any compelling piece of scholarship, this book prompts questions. Why no mention of Minneapolis’s unique, longstanding practice of “patrol limits,” a way to restrict alcohol sales to just a few portions of the city? What of the St. Paul women who weren’t advocating for temperance? Were some acting subversively, consuming alcohol on the down low? Were taverns primarily spaces where male laborers got soused after work, as temperance activists would have it, or did they serve other needs, such as places for sociability? And why is less attention paid to Scandinavian immigrants than to German and Irish?

In showing drink to be an important, complex element of identity, *We Are What We Drink* models the way local and regional scholarship can answer further questions about what people’s drinking practices say about the culture of a place, still an under-examined area of study.

—Bruce Johansen

BRUCE JOHANSEN holds a PhD in American studies from the University of Maryland. A freelance writer, he is a contributor to a forthcoming history of Minneapolis’s Seward neighborhood, once home to the “hub of hell,” a liquor patrol district that resulted in a concentration of drinking establishments in Seward.