

Against Moderation  
By ROBERT R. HARRIS

## THE JOY OF DRINKING

By Barbara Holland.  
150 pp. Bloomsbury. \$14.95.

It's odd the books people get asked to review. Take this one, a carefree history of our long love affair with drinking. I have no training as a historian, just some slight experience on both sides of bars. And perhaps an exaggerated reputation for disparaging today's ubiquitous alcohol-free business lunches. Barbara Holland, though, might empathize. She reminds us that in 1787, two days before their work was done, the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention "adjourned to a tavern for some rest, and according to the bill they drank 54 bottles of Madeira, 60 bottles of claret, 8 of whiskey, 22 of port, 8 of hard cider and 7 bowls of punch so large that, it was said, ducks could swim around in them.

Then they went back to work and finished founding the new Republic." Note the 55 delegates and 54 bottles of Madeira. Which founder was slacking?

But "The Joy of Drinking" begins way before "our Revolution was born and raised in taverns." It goes back some 10,000 years to when society, or what there was of it, went agricultural. Crops got planted and harvested, and some rotted and fermented, forming a liquid you could drink. The party began. Holland cites Faulkner as observing that civilization began with fermentation, and he'd have known.

Drink, she writes, became "the social glue of the human race. Probably in the beginning we could explain ourselves to our close family members with grunts, muttered syllables, gestures, slaps and punches. Then when the neighbors started dropping in to help harvest, stomp, stir and drink the bounty of the land, after we'd softened our natural suspicious hostility with a few stiff ones, we had to think up some more nuanced communication, like words. From there it was a short step to grammar, civil law, religion, history and 'The Whiffenpoof Song.' " And she sketches the evolution of this process around the globe: in China, India, Africa, the Islamic world (!), Europe and the Americas, though her reliance on Marco Polo as a source may raise an actual historian's eyebrows.

Beer was always big, and may even be healthy. The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Holland writes, "claims that a moderate beer drinker - whatever that means - swallows 11 percent of his dietary protein needs, 12 percent of the carbohydrates, 9 percent of essential phosphorus, 7 percent of his riboflavin, and 5 percent of niacin. Should he go on to immoderate beer drinking, he becomes a walking vitamin pill." That last is an assertion upon which any given issue of Science Times will be sure to pounce. Still, I'll take it, having long since abandoned hope of someone coming up with any health benefits of smoking.

Holland slowly savors what E. B. White called, in that genteel New Yorker way, "the golden companionship of the tavern." She notes that "in a proper pub everyone there is potentially, if not a lifelong friend, at least someone to lure into an argument about foreign policy or," God help us all, "the Red Sox." And she knows that "to extract the fullest flavor of our drinking house, we needed to spend serious evening time there, slowly coming to know the bartender and the regulars, their joys and sorrows." But becoming a "regular" isn't as easy as "Cheers" may have made it seem; a decent bar's culture is tough to crack.

Coffeehouses, it must be admitted, have often vied with bars for our affections. In Shakespeare's day, Holland writes, "coffeehouses sprang up to challenge the taverns. The authorities were

suspicious of the whole thing and sent spies to eavesdrop. In the taverns all was amiable and easy, but the coffeehouses were cauldrons of edgy malcontents." Throw in some iPods and wired soccer moms and you could be at Starbucks.

Holland traces the origin of the toast and of settling lawsuits "out of court" (in colonial America taverns were built next to courthouses, and opposing parties would go next door to talk things over). She describes the mechanics of hangovers and their cures and elaborates on the ceremony of mixing martinis. James Bond, she argues, was "the wave of the future, the drinker not as merrymaker," personified by Nick and Nora Charles of "Thin Man" fame, but the drinker "as expert, authority, specialist."

And as you might guess, Holland, who has written a dozen or so previous books, has done impressive research on a subject dear to some of us - writers who drink. Mentioned are Johnson and Boswell, John Donne (!), Byron, [Oscar Wilde](#), Evelyn Waugh, Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley, [Eugene O'Neill](#), Edmund Wilson, Thomas Wolfe, Hart Crane, Malcolm Lowry, [Robert Lowell](#), John O'Hara, Kingsley Amis. And, of course, Dylan Thomas, who once defined an alcoholic as "someone you don't like who drinks as much as you do."

Holland has a light, winsome touch and is always funny. Here she is on [Winston Churchill](#) making a martini: he "poured the gin into a pitcher and then nodded ritually at the bottle of vermouth across the room." She tells us that even the [National Institutes of Health](#) admits that what it calls "alcohol readministration" alleviates the symptoms of both alcohol withdrawal and hangovers, and notes that " 'readministraton' seems to mean hair of the dog." She quotes the Puritan minister Increase Mather - "Drink is in itself a good Creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness, but the abuse of drink is from Satan, the wine is from God, but the Drunkard is from the Devil" - and declares his words "an early version of our incessant 'moderation' sermons, with only a pint or two dividing heaven from hell."

As much as Holland enjoys romping down London's Gin Lane and through America's Jazz Age and Prohibition, she can't abide our current era of moderation. Hip urbanites, she writes, "turned drinking in moderation into a high-class avocation." Wine tours caught on and microbreweries arrived. The devotees "aren't drinkers. They're connoisseurs and critics, priests of ritual, sniffers and tasters, discerning scholars scowling thoughtfully into their glass. Fun has nothing to do with it. ... In the metropolitan haunts of the highly sophisticated, the cocktail is no longer an instrument of friendship but a competitive fashion statement, or one-upmanship."

Before vodka, which is pretty much tasteless, "hit our shores," she says, "much of what you put in your drink had a flavor of its own. Who put chocolate syrup in their rum or produced lemon-flavored Scotch?" Then distillers started flavoring vodka with fruit - oranges, apples, raspberries, blueberries - and hip urbanites lapped it up. Now some of the emperor's children among us are inhaling it.

Holland, who lives in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, certainly doesn't end with recipes for foo-foo drinks. She provides hints on making your own spirits, like applejack and elderberry wine, and instructions for building, yes, a still. Glancing at the diagram, I'd advise being sober if you try.

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