

We Are What We Drink: The Temperance Battle in Minnesota

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that the middle is never the complete picture? At the very least, this examination of French Canadians in northern Illinois reminds us to be wary of painting with too broad of a brush.

We Are What We Drink: The Temperance Battle in Minnesota, by Sabine N. Meyer. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015. xiv, 269 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 hardcover.

Reviewer James E. Klein is associate professor of history at Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, Texas. He is the author of *Grappling with Demon Rum: The Cultural Struggle over Liquor in Early Oklahoma* (2008).

In *We Are What We Drink*, Sabine N. Meyer provides a nuanced examination of the campaign to ban alcohol in early Minnesota. The stance individuals took on the liquor question was determined by religion, economic class, ethnicity, gender, and civic identity. The latter, she argues, is a product of the former factors, but also of place, citing St. Paul as an example—that city’s civic identity influenced residents’ stance on liquor. She also studies the staunchly dry position of Bishop John Ireland and the split that created between Irish and German Catholics. While the temperance issue shaped Irish and German ethnic identities in Minnesota, it also created a public identity for Minnesota women, who previously had been relegated to the home.

Meyer begins with the early European settlement of Minnesota by fur traders and the raucous reputation earned by early St. Paul, originally named Pig’s Eye after a local liquor dealer. The 1850s temperance movement saw middle-class reformers, relocated from New England, attempting to civilize the Minnesota wilderness. They failed to curb St. Paul’s liquor industry because it was a part of residents’ civic and masculine identity.

By the late nineteenth century, Irish Americans, aspiring to middle-class status, remade their ethnic identity by adopting abstinence as a badge of respectability. German immigrants, from the distinct regions of Prussia, Saxony, Westphalia, Bavaria, and others, instead used opposition to temperance (based on a devotion to the concept of personal liberty) as a shared trait to create a unified German American culture. As their initial social standing was higher than that of Irish Americans, they saw no need to emulate the middle-class expression of respectability—opposition to alcohol. Rather, they viewed the temperance movement as an attack on German American culture.

St. Paul, influenced by the prominent position of German American brewers and by residents’ devotion to the notion of *joie de vivre*, opposed and resisted liquor regulations, pitting the city against the state

government and contrasting that city with its twin settlement, the more refined Minneapolis. Residents of the Twin Cities internalized these different identities, thwarting effective liquor regulation in St. Paul and further differentiating the two municipalities.

The temperance campaign provided women with a rare opportunity to enter the previously male public sphere of society. Minnesota's Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the vehicle for this entrance into public affairs, redefined gender roles and emboldened women for the subsequent woman suffrage campaign. Irish American men, notably Bishop Ireland, accepted women into the temperance campaign as they gained middle-class status.

Minnesota received mixed results from a high license campaign in the 1890s and adopted county option in 1915. As a result, 51 of 86 counties went dry. American entrance into the Great War branded the German American liquor stance as unpatriotic, dooming efforts to stave off the growing prohibition campaign. The war, specifically women's extensive work in support of it, also convinced male officeholders to support woman suffrage.

Sabine extensively cites a rich temperance literature yet charts her own course in explaining dry success and wet failures in Minnesota. She builds on Joseph Gusfield's work on status anxiety in explaining the Irish abstinence campaign. Her discussion of local civic identity as shaping and being shaped by the temperance campaign represents a new direction in liquor studies, one that warrants further examination. She asserts that ethnicity, religion, and place shaped the civic identity of St. Paul as much or more than economic class, although she accepts Roy Rosenzweig's characterization of the saloon as a working man's club. She notes that Irish Americans of all economic classes joined abstinence organizations, although social elites typically led these groups. She also notes that German American businessmen organized the wet opposition to temperance but gives little attention to the working-class culture that formed in saloons. Her acknowledgment that temperance leaders typically were middle class also suggests that economic class factored into the liquor issue in addition to ethnicity, religion, and place. She asserts that Minnesotans' varied stances on liquor shaped their identities. Building on Claude Fischer's contention that the food we eat shapes our sense of self, Sabine argues convincingly that we are what we drink (or choose not to drink).