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Reflection Essay

TEACHING ALCOHOL AND DRUG HISTORY
TO UNDERGRADUATES

Cheryl Krasnick Warsh

Courses in the history of alcohol and drug use in Canada remain, to some extent, esoteric, although they are becoming more common. This greater focus is due to the academic and student interest in the areas of popular culture, the various sub-divisions of social history, and medical history. A number of things have struck me about teaching in this area. First of all, there appears to be more of it taught (and written) on Canada's coasts. Robert Campbell has published his second study of British Columbian liquor laws, and Shawn Cafferky, a new scholar, has taught a seminar on alcohol at the University of Victoria; on the East Coast, Ernie Forbes has developed a course on rum-running while Greg Marquis has recently entered the field as well.¹ Each scholar's work is firmly grounded in the history of his region. Recent scholarship in central Canada—I'm thinking here of the books by Sharon Cook, Jan Noel and Mariana Valverde, and the studies by Chris Anstead and others—deal primarily with the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and temperance in general.²

I make it clear to students how debates over the regulation of alcohol span the spectrum of Canadian politics and social affairs. In the fur trade period, alcohol was a favored instrument of trade and had devastating and lasting effects upon Native peoples. In the later colonial period (c.1820s and 1830s), temperance societies, many of which were imported by American immigrants, became targets

of anti-American, anti-republican British-born settlers and elites, and centers for subversive, democratic agitation. This culminated in the Rebellions of 1837 and 1838, which started, in Canada West (Ontario) at Montgomery's Tavern north of York (Toronto).³ In the 1890s, temperance agitation led to a Royal Commission on the Liquor Traffic and a subsequent national referendum which split the country along French/English, urban/rural and middle-class/working-class lines, to the consternation of the centrist government of the Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier. Throughout the twentieth century, alcohol has remained an integral aspect of Canadian identity, especially since the two leading teams of the national sport, hockey, (the Montreal Canadiens Habitants and the Toronto Maple Leafs,) were owned for many years by the leading brewers (Molson's and Labatt's). The recent popularity of an advertisement (I am Canadian) espousing Canadian values while selling a beer attests to the continued association of alcohol with Canadian nationalism.

Teaching alcohol and drug history is very political, and very personal, and so different in 2006 than twenty years ago. First of all, we were then in the heyday of Marxist social history and the rites (as in rituals) and the rights (as in civil) of the working man still set the agenda for Every Man having his fair drink, his Saint Monday and his treat. But we also lived the life of Every Man—University style. And, being only one of two female students in graduate History in my years at the University of Western Ontario, I became Every Man as well—or I would have had no social contact at all with my peers (not being a hockey player). Graduate school was awash in alcohol. Seminars ended at the Ceeps (short for the CP [Canadian Pacific] Hotel); exams were bemoaned at the Graduate Pub; and the most drunken parties were undergraduate ones at a professor's house (who shall remain nameless—he is no longer in academia). And the temperance rhetoric of Frances Willard and Ben Spence and company were middle-class diatribes—neglected children, family dysfunction and breakdowns, poverty, violence—all exaggerated anti-working-class propaganda.

But I never liked getting drunk; I never liked watching my friends and colleagues have personality changes under the influence of alcohol; I never liked hearing about those who dropped out, crashed cars, or came to class with shiners. And then I began dabbling in Women's History, and learned about gender, and that I'm not alone. And I learned that women reliant upon sole male wage earners who drank really did have malnourished children, and really did get beaten, and their children really were abused.

I realized the times had changed as well in the past few years when I taught about alcohol and temperance in pop culture courses and in the Canadian survey. Students still love reading about "Joe Beef," Peter DeLottinville's classic study about a nineteenth-century saloon on the Montreal waterfront (one article that has lamentably been dropped from the anthologies).⁴ But it's the working-class camaraderie and the pet bear in the cellar they love to read about—not the drinking. When I read passages from the temperance tracts, nobody laughs any more. So I've started asking every class to raise their hands if their own families, or ones close to them, have been affected by alcohol abuse. And the show of hands is never less than eighty percent. Once it was 100 percent. I don't know if Nanaimo's representative of all Canadian cities. I do know that the few Aboriginal students in the class were relieved, and surprised, when their hands weren't the only ones raised.

In Atlantic Canada, where Forbes and Marquis write, binge drinking is alive and well. And despite the growing number of courses, the liquor legislation, the high taxes, the Dry Grads, the MADDs, there is still a great deal of alcohol history yet untold. For instance, in the last hundred years, tens of thousands of Canadians fought in brutal global wars, and experienced terrible things, and many came home really screwed up. We read snippets about the returning vets who overturned Prohibition; who spent their evenings (and many days) in the old smoke-filled Legion Halls where drinking was constant. But what legacies did they leave their families? How many of today's generations are still victims of the two World Wars (the descendants not only of veterans but of refugees)? How many alco-

holics and children and grandchildren of alcoholics are still victims of residential schools? In so many ways—physiologically, psychologically, culturally—alcohol abuse *is* history.

Another interesting development—at least from where I live—is that the students perceive alcohol as more of a commodity. Most of the part-time jobs left that they can get are service jobs—and many of the students work in bars and restaurants as servers. They explain to me why it is you can't get a glass of water the first time you ask at a restaurant, and why smoke-free bars are so important to them. So alcohol is more of a conscious commodity (if there's such a thing) than it was twenty years ago.

Then there are drugs. Let me tell you about Nanaimo. It is the west coast headquarters of the Hell's Angels. There are no violent turf wars here, as in Quebec. They own their turf; they own respectable restaurants (and disreputable strip joints); they own car dealerships; they hold an annual convention cum fair at their compound, Angel Acres, where the public's invited. They are rarely busted for drug-trafficking—that is reserved mostly for young Vietnamese immigrants who can't speak English and who are occasionally deported, and for locals who turn entire apartment buildings into grow-ops and who are busted by B. C. Hydro for diverting so much power. Then there are the gulf islands in the Georgia Strait—Gabriola, Salt Spring, Galliano—inhabited by hippies and American draft-dodgers for over thirty years now. Marijuana is the national crop. Its many uses are glorified. One student in my popular culture course did a study of the beneficent and ancient history of hemp. I don't believe he ever wove a basket or fashioned a skirt in his life. But so it goes.

The history of drug use in Canada is still evolving, and crosses into areas of criminology, constitutional law and, of course, medicine. Dan Malleck, Marcel Martel and others are writing about legislation, racism and the disjuncture between regulation and practice.⁵ I teach about drug use in the widest sense—from Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound and chloral hydrate cocktails prescribed by physicians to Ewan Cameron's LSD experiments on psychiatric

patients in Montreal to the Direct-to-Consumer advertising of Pre-marlin, Prozac, and Viagra. Wyeth-Ayerst, Upjohn, and Glaxo may have made even more money last year than the Hell's Angels.⁶

And, of course, we cross over to gender issues again. The twentieth was the medicated century for women, and there's no law against getting stoned when you get pregnant although if you are an alcoholic or a user of illicit recreational drugs and have encountered Social Services at some point you may have your children taken from you. There are precedents for this of course and students can learn about J. J. Kelso and other child-saving agencies. Catherine Carstairs, following Pat Roy's earlier work, reminds us of the white-slavery hysteria surrounding the Chinese opium dens, particularly on the west coast at the turn of the century.⁷ Female students may get a chuckle out of that—until they go to the ladies' room and read signs about Rohypnol, the date rape drug, warning them to never put down their drink because a sexual predator—perhaps a colleague—may attack them.

The history of alcohol and drug use is mediated by contemporary concerns, and at least from my perspective, will never leave the realm of gender studies. It does have a significant role in the Canadian survey, in Aboriginal history and in the history of popular culture. I hope, and trust that it will continue to do so.

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NOTES

1. Robert Campbell, *Sit Down And Drink Your Beer: Regulating Vancouver's Beer Parlours, 1925-1954* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2000); Robert Campbell, *Demon Rum or Easy Money: Government Control of Liquor in British Columbia From Prohibition to Privatization* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991); Ernest Forbes, "The East-Coast Rum-Running Economy," in *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays*, ed. Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, 166-71 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Greg Marquis, "'A Reluctant Concession to Modernity': Alcohol and Modernization in the Maritimes, 1945-1980," *Acadiensis*, 32 (2003), 31-59.

2. Sharon Cook, *Through Sunshine and Shadow: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); Jan Noel, *Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades Before Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991); Christopher Anstead, "Hegemony and Failure: Orange Lodges, Temperance Lodges, and Respectability in Victorian Ontario," in *The Changing Face of Drink: Substance, Imagery and Behaviour*, ed. Jack Blocker and Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, 163-88 (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1997).

3. See the fine recent survey by Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2003).

4. Peter DeLottinville, "Joe Beef of Montreal: Working Class Culture and the Tavern, 1869-1889," *Labour/Le travail* 8-9 (Autumn 1981/Spring 1982): 9-40.

5. Dan Malleck, "'Its Baneful Effects are Too Well Known': Debates over Drug Use in Canada, 1867-1908," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History/ Bulletin canadien d'histoire de la médecine* 14 (1997): 263-88; Marcel Martel, "Que faire? Le gouvernement ontarien et la consommation des drogues à des fins récréatives, 1966-1972" *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History/ Bulletin canadien d'histoire de la médecine*, 20 (2003): 103-20.

6. Anne Collins, *In the Sleep Room: The Story Of The CIA Brainwashing Experiments In Canada* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1988).

7. Catherine Carstairs, *Jailed for Possession: Illegal Drug Use, Regulation, and Power in Canada, 1920-1961* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Patricia Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989).