

Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2016, \$27.95. Pp. 330; ISBN 9780393066951).

The War on Alcohol is a welcome contribution to an already extensive literature on American prohibition. As an established scholar of American history, Lisa McGirr brings her interest in the rise of the new right and social movements to re-examine the consequences of the 18th Amendment and Volstead Act on American society, culture, and politics. By drawing on archival records, newspapers, and a range of published primary sources, McGirr argues that national prohibition marked a crucial moment in the establishment of federal coercive power and surveillance that has continued to the present day. Under the auspices of protecting the public from the so-called evils of drink, a robust state apparatus was conceived and implemented, affecting not only the nature of justice, policing, and the prison system, but the role of the state in the private lives of citizens. She contends that this apparatus, far from being abandoned after prohibition, was appropriated and reoriented by politicians to serve a new generation of anxieties over mind-altering substances.

The book is organized chronologically around key themes in the growth, climax, and eventual repeal of the law. McGirr traces the origins of alcohol reformist agenda in nineteenth century Progressivism where she examines the strategies of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League, situating their efforts within the tumult of rapid immigration, industrialization, and urbanization between 1880 and 1920. Through this analysis, she unravels the differences between the WCTU and the ASL, as well as how their efforts dovetailed to shape policy at a state and federal level. Informed by evangelical Protestant ideals, such groups fashioned an alarming narrative associating alcohol to inefficiency, vice, and decline. Ideas about gender, race, class, and citizenship also informed prohibition rationale, as predominately white native-born middle-class reformers sought to maintain preeminence over new immigrants, racial minorities, and the poor.

From the origins of prohibition, the book turns to explore the passage of the 18th Amendment and Volstead Act, the growth of organized crime and bootlegging, and the colossal task of enforcement. McGirr reveals that while prohibition did not drain the cellars of the wealthy and well-connected or prevent the proliferation of secret drinking establishments, it shifted the burden of risk for prosecution and violence onto minorities and the poor, who had little say in the manufacturing and distribution of alcohol in their communities. She shows how the resurgent Ku Klux Klan seized on this moment, since dry laws fit well within its racist, anti-Catholic, and anti-immigrant leanings. Using mob violence

as a tool of power, the Klan targeted poor immigrant and minority neighborhoods to break up dives and stills in the name of morality and law and order. Meanwhile, as federal prosecutions increased under prohibition, the government built more prisons, expanded policing, and encroached further into the private lives of citizens. For McGirr, the origins of the “penal state” (p. 189) can be found in this period of structural hypocrisy and overzealous prosecution. The final chapters examine the waning years of prohibition and the push for repeal. As the law and its “selective enforcement” (p. 67) became increasingly unpopular, the voices of minorities and immigrant communities began to be heard. In response, savvy politicians, such as Al Smith and later Franklin D. Roosevelt, used the promise of repeal to reorient the Democratic Party and broaden popular support. The unintended consequences of prohibition ultimately made it politically untenable and led to its demise.

The War on Alcohol is a well-researched and thought-provoking book that is made stronger by its accessible prose and interesting historical vignettes. Indeed, McGirr reveals the experiences and strategies of citizens as they negotiated corruption, crime, and injustice. The case study of “citizen warriors” (p. 121) is especially fascinating, since it shows the militant activism that emerged to maintain support for dry laws. While McGirr rightly places the origins of national prohibition in the Progressive era, more could have been said about the influence of earlier state-level legislation, such as Raines Law or the Maine Liquor Law.

This book will appeal to a range of readers, including health professionals, graduate students, citizen action groups, and policy-makers. Although it is primarily concerned with national prohibition, it speaks to contemporary debates about drug laws and mass incarceration. It provides a useful historical case study on the unintended consequences of a well-meaning but dysfunctional policy and its effects on the lives of ordinary citizens.

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