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Book Review: Taylor, Jason E. *The Brew Deal: How Beer Helped Battle the Great Depression*. Cham: Springer, 2024. 274 Pp.

This book is primarily concerned with the repeal of Prohibition in the US. The first chapter begins by describing the excitement that developed amongst beer drinkers in various States when Prohibition was partially ended at midnight on 6 April, 1933. After this date, sales of beer which did not exceed 3.2 alcohol by weight (approximately four per cent alcohol by volume ((abv))), were permitted. Subsequent chapters discuss the contested notions of intoxicating liquor, the impact of Prohibition on the operation of brewing companies, and the revival of brewers' fortunes after 1933. Later chapters assess the extent to which recovery of brewing aided national recovery in the 1930s, and consider whether the use of initial public offerings (IPOs) to finance new plant and equipment represented a speculative bubble.

Prohibition was in force between 1920 and 1933. It was a highly contentious piece of legislation which pitted “dry” politicians, states, and social-religious movements against their ‘wet’ brethren. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, attempts to abolish or modify the maximum strength of beer (0.5 percent abv) began just a few days after Prohibition was introduced (p. 39). However, these efforts failed. As Jason Taylor explains, considerable ingenuity was used by the “wets” to abolish Prohibition. For example, it was claimed that “3.2” beer was nourishing and wholesome and thus it was misleading to claim that non-intoxicating drinks had to be non-alcoholic. It was not until the election of Roosevelt (a “wet” politician leading a “wet” party), in 1932—at the height of the Great Depression—that the economic arguments for increasing this abv became prominent. Indeed, according to Taylor, this depression was the key factor that resulted in the legalization of “3.2” beer in April 1933. In the following months, campaigns sought to secure the complete abolition of restrictions on the alcoholic strength of beer, and on 5 December, 1933, Prohibition was abolished.

Taking account of the input-output linkages between brewing and other industries, such as aluminum and copper (for vats), rubber (piping), glass, lithography (posters), and restaurants, the ending of Prohibition aided the recovery in employment. According to Taylor, the increase in beer production accounted for approximately 12.5 percent of employment recovery in 1933 (p. 129). Taylor also makes the plausible, but unquantifiable claim, that the legal sale of stronger beer raised expectations about the future, both among consumers, and brewers who began to seek investment to modernize/refurbish their plant.

A key strength of this book is the contrast Taylor makes between federal, state, county and city responses to the *partial* abolition of Prohibition on 7 April 1933. Thus, Utah and Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama, and Kansas, did not introduce amending legislation until 1934, 1935, and 1937, respectively. Within states, some cities were “dry” because of “local option” which was introduced prior to Prohibition. Consequently, cities such as Berkeley, Los Angeles, San Jose, and Corona, continued either to be severely restricted by local option, or they had to amend city ordinances. Remarkably, until 1974, the State of Virginia stipulated that “3.2” was the maximum strength of beer that could be sold to 18-year olds.

One topic that is both interesting and ironic, was how the National Industrial Recovery Act, which was intended to promote growth, accelerated concentration in the US brewing industry, with potentially adverse consequences for consumer choice. Whether this was unintended, or a supreme example of regulatory capture, is open to debate. In any event, as Taylor explains, this Act introduced a “three-tiered system” which favored larger brewers by accelerating the decline of keg beer in favor of canned and bottled beer. This trend had an unfortunate consequence because it promoted the production of homogenous or bland beer (pp. 136-137). In contrast, with the exception of California, the geographical location of US brewing was largely unaffected by Prohibition and its repeal.

It is difficult to determine which academic audience will find this book most appealing. Apart from the material held by the American Breweriana Association, brewers’ archives are not consulted. The sources used are entirely secondary, and heavily dependent on newspaper commentary. Some readers may form the view that certain chapters are too descriptive and therefore not entirely convincing. This perspective is likely to be most justified with respect to chapter eight, “Financing the brewery revival of 1933”, and chapter nine, “Was there a beer bubble and (and pop)”? The former chapter would have benefited from the use of more descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and maximum and minimum valuation of IPO offerings). The latter chapter begins with important questions: was the financial and physical investment in brewery assets too much, or too little, or just about right? And were brewery investors rewarded with strong returns? However, in the opinion of this reviewer, these questions are not answered satisfactorily. For example, what yardstick is used to determine the adequacy of returns? Alternatively, how did the returns in brewing compare with returns in ancillary industries—aluminum and copper, glass, and rubber—which also benefited from the abolition of Prohibition? Another observation is that the structure of the book may appear unbalanced: Taylor discusses in chapter ten what happened to “3.2” beer after 1933 but does not address what happened to the Temperance movement after this date.

Despite these caveats, (or perhaps because of them), this book is an engaging read. The writing style is pacy which helps to convey the speed with which social, political, and economic forces coalesced and generated the momentum which led to the abolition of Prohibition. I learned a lot from this book. For scholars who have questioned why Prohibition was such a big deal in the US, Taylor provides many answers.

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