PROHIBITION/SOME LIKE IT HOT

It is fair to say that alcohol has been part of the experience of humankind for many thousands of years. The Greeks and Romans, for instance, were great wine drinkers. The Romans brought Viticulture to England as a result of their conquest of Britain, yet its sale and consumption in the twentieth century was prohibited (hence the term Prohibition) in the USA for over a decade.

However, alcohol has been a cause of both pleasure and problems. In the eighteenth century there was huge concern about the consumption of cheap gin, particularly in the London area. By 1750 a quarter of the houses in the slum areas of Holborn were gin shops. It was having a catastrophic effect on the health of working class people. A viewing of Bills of Mortality where all deaths had to be recorded would confirm this. Parliament was forced to act. Henry Fielding a prominent magistrate enlisted the help of the engraver William Hogarth. He produced two very famous prints, namely Gin Lane and Beer Street. In the former, the people were destitute and in a very poor physical condition. In the latter, they were plump, happy and prosperous. In 1751 the so-called Gin Act was passed by Parliament this greatly increased the tax on spirits and their sale by distillers and shopkeepers was strictly controlled. At the time of writing I contacted the Scotch Whisky Association that is based in Edinburgh, the lady to whom I spoke told me that the current tax on a standard bottle of Scotch Whisky is 75%, it has been, she stated, reduced from 78% in the Budget of March 2015. A century after Hogarth, Gustav Dore a French illustrator, produced the illustration “Over London by Rail”, this again highlighted poverty and the problems that existed in an expanding and industrialised Britain.

Alcohol was also controversial in America. In 1657 the General Court of Massachusetts made the sale of strong alcohol “whether known by the name of rum, strong water, wine, brandy etc…” illegal. Then abuse of alcohol was widely frowned upon. Shortly after independence from Britain the Whiskey Rebellion took place, this was a protest at Government taxes on Whisky. However, the debate still raged. Benjamin Rush was one of the leading physicians of the time, he believed in moderation rather than prohibition. In his work “The Inquiry into the effects of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Body and Mind (1784) he was very critical of drunkenness. Many people were influenced by Rush and in Connecticut a Temperance Association was founded in 1789. Other Associations followed, in Virginia in 1800 and New York in 1808. Some differences were noted in the viewpoints of men and women where then latter tended to be more against drink while some men apparently considered it good for their health and well-being.

In Britain the Sunday Closing Act (Wales) was introduced in 1881. This was as a result of pressure from the Temperance Movement and the Nonconformist Chapels. This meant quite simply that pubs closed on Sundays throughout Wales. Private social clubs opened as a result and were excluded from this legislation. This was repealed by the Licensing Act of 1961 but this Act allowed Local Authorities to make decisions relating to their areas. By 1996 all local government areas except Dwyfor in North West Wales voted in support of the opening of licensed premises on Sundays. It was also in this year that changes in local government boundaries were introduced. This resulted in the removal of the last ban on Sunday opening. In 2003 the requirement for regular polls on Sunday opening in Wales was abolished. These events were covered by B.B.C. Wales in an excellent documentary entitled “Temperance and Temptation”. It was one of a series of documentaries produced called collectively “the Welsh Way of Life”. This particular one had been recommended to me by a cousin living in Cardiff and B.B.C. Wales very kindly produced for me a copy DVD to use educationally.

A momentum was gathering and the American Temperance Society was founded in 1869. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) founded in 1873 hoped to be able to influence children and there was an attempt to educate husbands and thereby prevent domestic abuse. In 1881 Kansas became the first State to outlaw alcoholic drinks. Religious groups were fairly divided, Northern and Southern Baptists, for instance, being in favour of Prohibition. Catholics generally, however, did not feel that it was the duty of the State to determine human morality. Many of whom were termed Progressives in the U.S.A. had been born on farms in the Mid-West and they felt that drunkenness was a problem in relation to working hours lost and domestic violence.

American involvement in the First World War gave a boost to the support of Prohibition. Interestingly in the U.S.A. there was widespread anti-German feeling; Brewers it was said were often of German origin and that they might support the German war effort. After the Russian Revolution it was said that Bolshevism thrived on drink. U.S. politicians tend to be very much against Communism; it is anti-

business and anti-Religion, both the Korean and Vietnam wars that were fought to hold back the spread of communism many years after these events under the so-called Domino Theory. It is worth noting that King George V gave up drink to help support the war effort. A point was made that the manufacture of beer and whisky used up corn that might otherwise be used to feed the Allies. In Britain the Defence of the Realm Act was introduced in 1914, this was designed to help the British war effort. It placed rules upon the consumption of alcohol. You could not buy brandy or whisky in a railway refreshment room. The opening hours of pubs were cut, beer was watered down and customers in pubs were not allowed to buy rounds of drinks!

Prohibition was actually in place from 1920 – 1933; it was widely supported by Progressives in the Republican and Democrat Parties. On the 29th. June 1918 that Eighteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution was passed. It was the Nineteenth Amendment that gave women the vote and became law on 26th. August 1920. The enabling legislation of Prohibition was the Volstead Act that set in place the rules for the ban of alcohol.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the consumption of alcohol the price paid by society was to be very high, 2,000,000,000 dollars' worth of business was transferred from the brewers and bar owners into the hands of bootleggers (these were people who smuggled and illegally transported alcoholic drink) and gangsters. The huge amount of money generated, not subject to taxation, was used to enhance the power of the gangsters. Corruption and blackmail became commonplace. Protection rackets thrived. Gangland murders soared. People were not brought to justice. In New York City out of 6,902 cases involving breaches of the Volstead Act 6074 were dismissed for "insufficient evidence "and 400 cases never even came to trial Out of 514 people arrested in gambling raids in 1926 and 1927, only five were held for trial!

In 1929 the Wall Street Crash occurred, this sent economic shockwaves throughout the World. Britain and Germany, for instance were badly affected. Germany suffered very serious economic effects and political instability that in the long run helped Hitler gain power. Many products from around the World were affected, for example, cocoa production in Ghana, perfume manufacture in France, textiles in Britain and coffee production in Brazil. The USA where the economic crisis began was very badly affected. The US Government was not getting revenue in from the consumption of alcohol at a time when it would have been very useful! Returning to gangland violence this reached something of a peak with the St. Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929. This conflict was, it seems, between the South Side Italian Gang that had affiliations to Al Capone and the North Side Irish Gang; both sides wanted to take control of organised crime in Chicago. Five members of the North Side Gang were killed, plus two others. The actual perpetrators of this crime, it seems, are not known.

Prohibition ended with the 21st. Amendment on 5th.December 1933. So why did Prohibition come to an end? It had, in fact, never had much support in urban areas. It also became clear that it was not stopping people drinking. It was very difficult to enforce. It criminalised many otherwise law abiding people. The Enforcement Agency did not have enough agents and many of the Police did not support it. The USA has very long borders with Canada in the North and Mexico in the South. Drink from Canada came over the border with border officials often not bothering about it. Illegal drink, for instance Moonshine, continued to be produced in the USA. The profits generated, as mentioned, had been immense. Al Capone who controlled Chicago made 60 million dollars each year from his Speakeasies (these were illegal drinking establishments). He felt that Prohibition had created a demand and that he was satisfying this demand.

There had been, as touched upon earlier, a huge increase in violence and murder for which people were not punished! One gang had 400 Police Officers on its payroll. Health problems increased rapidly. Much of the drink provided in the Speakeasies was not fit for consumption. When Al Capone was finally sent to prison it was for tax evasion. In the context of Prohibition the code of Omerta (put simply a code of silence that meant not informing and cooperating with the Police) that underpinned the Mafia and Organised Crime had proved to be effective!

This period of history has for years fascinated many people, from 15th. October 1960 to 20th.January 1962 the series "The Roaring Twenties", starring Dorothy Provine as its lead female character, played on British Television. The most famous depiction of these times I would suggest was the film "Some Like It Hot" This was produced by Billy Wilder and starred Tony Curtis, Jack Lemmon and Marilyn Monroe. The plot related to two men who had witnessed the Valentine's Day Massacre and had to run

for their lives. They joined a band composed of female musicians one of whom, of course, was Marilyn Monroe.

I had always wanted to read the truth behind this movie and two ladies at Shrewsbury and Pontesbury Library tracked down for me a book by Tony Curtis (written with Mark A. Vierira) that told the story of the movie. The movie became a huge hit but it had an uncertain start at its first showing. It was previewed first at the Bay Theatre in the Pacific Palisades in Los Angeles. This area is I suppose what we might term a dormitory town on the coast. The film was advertised as a major production. It seems that most of the audience thought that they were going to see Elizabeth Taylor in “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. The audience were, it seems, older and affluent. When some of them saw two men impersonating women they dragged their children from the cinema! Some, it would seem, did not appreciate that they were watching a comedy until some way into the film. Tony Curtis makes the point that a negative cost of 2,883,848 dollars had been run up in the making of the film. He also states that the reputations of many of the major players were at risk! There was not, it seems, much laughter for what was a comedy. Some cuts were rapidly made and another review was booked, this time it was at the Village Theatre in Westwood, Los Angeles. The audience at this preview was very different. There were college students and a mix of older and younger people. There was, in consequence, a very different reaction. I suppose that judging what the public wants must be very difficult in all sorts of enterprises. This audience found the film hilarious, it went on to become one of the most famous comedy films and more that paid back the investments made by its makers and the efforts put in by the actors and actresses. In 1962 it grossed 14 million dollars in the USA and it went on to gross 25,000,000 dollars in the USA. In rentals in the USA it grossed 8, 300,000 dollars. It had had, as stated earlier, a budget of 2,883,848 dollars.

It has gone on to become a much loved film. I was surprised when talking to two younger friends how much they had enjoyed watching it; they were not born when it was made. The jokes are excellent and I often ponder how clever people must be who think up these amusing lines.

The issues raised by this article are many and varied and it is not for me to comment. I would suggest, however, that they do have a very strong relevance for modern day society.

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