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# INTRODUCTION

by Jean Barman

BEER, WINE, A MARTINI? What will you have?

But wait. Maybe it's not up to you or me to decide. Maybe it's not even possible to have a drink at all.

The decision whether or not to have a drink containing alcohol was in past time made by others on our behalf. It was not we who responded "yes" or "no," but rather self-designated moral arbiters acting in our supposed best interests. They were determined to control our access to beer, wine and spirits.

Historically, few commodities have agitated so many would-be reformers as has liquor. Convinced of their own superiority, men and women sought to prevent others from engaging in what was, from their perspective, improper behaviour. For some the goal was moderation or temperance; for others it was outright prohibition.

The movement for prohibition in British Columbia to some

extent reflected sentiment more generally across North America and beyond. The provincial campaigns for and against access to alcohol also had, as Douglas Hamilton convincingly demonstrates in *Sobering Dilemma*, distinctive features.

To understand the fervour liquor excited, we have to remind ourselves of the hold Christianity long exercised in Canada and across the Western world. In the nineteenth century adherents became convinced of their obligation to ensure not just their own salvation, but that of everyone else. Their determination to alter indigenous ways of life was one manifestation of this conviction, the movement for temperance and prohibition another.

It seemed inexplicable to erstwhile reformers that some men and women, particularly those whose way of life was unlike their own, would squander their hard-earned wages on drink. To this view was added an element of fear of bodies out of control by virtue of being intoxicated. Beer and wine, long part of everyday life, were bad enough; distilled spirits such as gin and rum were far worse in their effects. Something had to be done.

Protestants in particular turned their attention to creating “the kingdom of God” on earth as opposed to awaiting heaven. It was not just men who acted. Many women of the dominant society were looking for an acceptable means to gain some small measure of authority outside of the home, and the campaign against liquor consumption gave them the opportunity to do so. Reformers became convinced, in Hamilton’s words, that if only liquor “could be eliminated, mankind, it was prophesied by the true believers, would return to a state that would resemble the garden paradise of Adam and Eve.” Canada would become a kind of heaven on earth.

It seemed for a time as if the reformers would triumph. Prohibition was enacted in Prince Edward Island in 1901, and some other provinces restricted public drinking. Quebec was the principal holdout, not surprising given its Roman Catholic ethos. The First World War gave prohibitionists the boost they needed. Successfully portraying drinking as unpatriotic, they closed down the alcohol business across the country. “Canada was engaged in a duel to the

death, and the use of liquor struck at the very heart of the war effort. It not only stole precious food; it also distracted and befuddled soldiers and workers.” Following a provincial vote, prohibition took effect in British Columbia on October 1, 1917.

Douglas Hamilton’s choice of title, *Sobering Dilemma*, captures the weakness of the prohibitionist movement. It offered what he quite rightly terms “simple solutions” to complex issues. Aboriginal people would not be made amenable by denying them the right to drink. Nor would the problems of social dislocation caused by industrialization, urbanization and then the First World War be solved by closing down working people’s principal places of relaxation — bars, taverns and saloons. Many soldiers were opposed: the opportunity for a drink was one of the few diversions from hard-fought battles.

Douglas pays particularly close attention to the Prohibition Act of 1916, subsequent provincial votes for and against prohibition, and the secret files of the BC Provincial Police. He argues persuasively that the prohibition legislation was not just race-based in forbidding drink to Aboriginal people but also class- and place-based in its loopholes for the well-off, particularly if living in a big city. It “helped to be white” and to reside in Vancouver or Victoria rather than in interior towns where “even minor violators were shown little mercy.” In addition, “wealthy tipplers could import from out of province” or “obtain legal booze through a doctor’s prescription.”

In just three years British Columbians decisively changed their view on prohibition, being the first province after Quebec to do so. In a plebiscite held on October 20, 1920, only 55,000 British Columbians voted to stick with prohibition compared to 92,000 voting for a system of government control of liquor which continues to the present day. Only two municipalities in the entire province — Richmond and Chilliwack — favoured the status quo. The first British Columbia government liquor store opened the next June 15th, the same day that prohibition was repealed. Public drinking establishments were not permitted until 1925 and then in far more restricted forms than had earlier been the case.

Other provinces gradually followed suit. The longest to hold out were, not unexpectedly, the firmly Protestant provinces of Nova Scotia to 1930 and Prince Edward Island to 1948. Public drinking was banned in the Maritimes until after the Second World War, in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island to the 1960s. Only in that decade were Aboriginal people treated like other Canadians in respect to access to liquor.

*Sobering Dilemma's* dissection of the movements for and against prohibition in British Columbia goes beyond the usual explanations. The province was drawn into the reform rhetoric through the particular circumstances of war, but British Columbians never gave the movement the wide-ranging support received elsewhere in English Canada.

A number of factors made British Columbia distinctive. Hamilton points out that "no other province in Canada contained such a high proportion of immigrants from the British Isles," most of whom "regarded the anti-liquor fanaticism of the Methodists and others with scepticism, even disdain." In 1921 six out of every ten immigrant British Columbians were born in Britain. The province also contained a large number of seasonal workers who, during their off months, needed some means for passing the time. Women's attraction to the cause was not as whole hearted as it might have been. They supported prohibition as a complement to suffrage, but only until they won the right to vote. Returned veterans were in general opposed. Some British Columbians fretted that prohibition was having a negative effect by increasing the use of other drugs.

Hamilton turns our attention to civil rights and to economic self-interest. Enforcement was extraordinarily difficult. "If prohibition meant posting a guard in every household, the price in liberty and privacy would be too much to bear." He dissects what he terms "the liquor patronage machine," which was closely aligned to provincial officials. There was big money to be made in alcohol, not just for friends of those in government but, increasingly, through licensing and taxation. Government liquor stores continue to bring large amounts of revenue into provincial coffers.

Today British Columbians take access to beer, wine and spirits for granted. We don't have a second thought in responding to the question of whether or not we want a drink containing alcohol. Perhaps we should. We may have come to a consensus on prohibition, but the fight has many echoes that reverberate into the present day.

The object of our zeal varies over time, but the underlying dynamic does not much alter. It is still often the case that the expense of enforcement, together with the economic benefits lost to government, is very able, as with prohibition, to render regulations inert. *Sobering Dilemma* offers an object lesson in how reform, whatever the target, is sometimes easier to enact than to sustain. We need to think through the feasibility of our desires.

Moral certainty, racism, fear of drunkenness — they all played a role in demonizing liquor. We are still prone to act as moral arbiters, and our reasons may be just as temporal as were those of prohibitionists. Be it marijuana possession, prostitution, big box stores, or any one of a number of current issues, we take stands in others' supposed best interests. Perhaps we are correct in doing so, but at the least we should examine our motives. *Sobering Dilemma* reminds us of the dangers of smugness in thinking that we have the answers on behalf of others.

—Jean Barman  
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