Anyone with an interest in Britain’s relationship with alcohol will have been hard pressed not to notice recurrent news reports over the last decade about binge-drinking, city centre “no-go” areas and the pressure that alcohol-related injuries and illnesses place on the NHS. Particularly following the passage of the Licensing Act 2003, some such reports feared that “Booze Britain” would embrace 24-hour drinking, leading to cataclysmic deteriorations in public order, public health and public decency. But even when this bacchanalian orgy failed to materialise, public discussions of alcohol consumption continued to be framed in often alarmist, or at least anxious, terms. In this wide-ranging, interdisciplinary study, Henry Yeomans sets out to confront the idea that there is a clear-cut relationship between alcohol-related problems in society and levels of public concern about consumption. Moreover, he makes a convincing case that such marked anxiety about drinking is actually quite distinctive to Britain, as compared to other European countries, and that this ultimately has its roots in Britain’s nineteenth-century history of temperance.

At the heart of Yeomans’s argument is the concept of moral regulation, a process involving both legal and extra-legal means, through which social behaviours are identified as “wrong” and then subjected to pressure to change. Although this is a somewhat nebulous concept, it does enable Yeomans to move beyond the idea of moral panic—as a relatively discrete and isolated outburst of censure—in explaining the frequent disjuncture in British history between the actual threat that alcohol consumption poses and levels of public anxiety about it. The book is therefore able to trace long-term continuities and changes in the moral values attached to alcohol consumption, as well as in the relationship between those moral
values and different regulatory practices, inside and outside the realm of law. As such, Yeomans deftly combines legal, sociological and historical approaches to provide an engaging overview of alcohol’s place in British society from the eighteenth century to the present day and to make important interventions into contemporary debates about alcohol consumption and its regulation.

*Alcohol and Moral Regulation* makes some significant contributions to ongoing historiographical debates. First and foremost, he challenges the view that the British temperance movement was essentially a failure. This view, Yeomans argues, is based on a comparison of the legislative outcomes of British and non-British temperance campaigns, particularly relative to the United States where a national prohibition law was implemented in 1920. Yeomans shows that by expanding the focus beyond purely legislative outcomes, the impact of the temperance movement in Britain was actually very substantial and long-lasting. Core ideas about alcohol and its dangers, moral and otherwise, promoted by the temperance movement in the Victorian period became commonplace and, although not universally accepted, continue to shape public discourse about alcohol consumption in the present day. These include ‘the idea that all types of alcohol are essentially problematic, the conception of drinking as a slippery slope and the normative weighting of individual choice as a means to govern behaviour’ (251). Yeomans shows the emergence and acceptance of these views during the nineteenth century and draws numerous parallels between temperance-era, twentieth-century and contemporary debates to highlight this continuity. For instance, while other scholars agree that the First World War saw an intensification of anti-alcohol sentiment in Britain, it has been emphasised that this related to the desire for national efficiency rather than the moral concerns about alcohol consumption that the temperance movement had spread. Yeomans shows that the moral value attached to abstinence and self-denial during the temperance era continued to inform the attitudes about alcohol during the war, fuelling a
high-profile pledge campaign so that civilians could show solidarity with fighting soldiers and improve the ‘moral goodness’ of the country (111).

Moreover, because the temperance movement was successful in shifting the moral terms of the debate about alcohol, Yeomans argues it did have a demonstrable impact on legislative approaches to regulation in both the short and long term. This approach also allows him to re-evaluate the importance of the First World War in setting the tone of alcohol regulation for much of the twentieth century. In fact, Yeomans shows that many of the measures introduced during the war—restricted opening hours, increased taxation, controls on alcohol content of beverages—simply intensified legislative trends that had already been established under the influence of temperance in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

Subsequent chapters challenge the prevailing view of the mid-to-late twentieth century as a time of legislative liberalisation and deregulation regarding alcohol, by showing how legal regulations and moral censure remained strict but became targeted on specific types of alcohol-related behaviour or on the drinking habits of specific social groups, particularly adolescents and young adults.

With such a broad scope to the analysis, it is inevitable that some parts of the argument are more persuasive than others. Yeomans acknowledges that the relaxation of some legislative restrictions on alcohol in the mid-to-late twentieth century was influenced by other developments, such as the increasing medicalisation of alcohol consumption, the ‘pub improvement’ project and the commercialisation of the night-time economy in urban centres (130, 170). However, the relationship between these different processes and the ongoing influence of the temperance-era moral regulation project is not always clear. Examining the changing medical views of alcohol from the eighteenth-century onwards within a separate chapter seemed to exacerbate this issue. Secondly, as the argument moved closer to the
contemporary moment, the use of national newspapers and political policies as the main source base for establishing the contours of public discourse became less appropriate.

Nevertheless, while some of the interpretive detail could be more finely tuned, it is the book’s scope that marks it out as a considerable achievement. Historians, sociologists and legal scholars will all benefit from reading this study and several features make it a particularly suitable work for undergraduates or others new to the field of alcohol studies. The introduction provides a concise, informative historical and historiographical review of the ‘ebb and flow’ of the Drink Question in British society, as well as an accessible introduction to key conceptual tools such as moral panic and moral regulation. An accessible tone is maintained throughout the book as a whole, and key parts of the argument, historical changes and long-term continuities are regularly summarised in bullet point form or in summary sections. The book also often identifies how Britain’s engagement with the Drink Question related to the experience of other countries; this feature will enable students to develop questions about the historically and culturally specific nature of many ideas and practices surrounding alcohol. Overall, then, Henry Yeomans has provided a provocative analysis of the interrelated moral and legal frameworks through which alcohol consumption has been regulated in Britain since the eighteenth century. Written in an accessible and engaging manner, it will appeal to a wide, interdisciplinary, specialist and non-specialist audience.

University of Leicester

Deborah Toner