

Gin: The Much Lamented Death of Madame Geneva

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William III's 1690 Act "for encouraging the distilling of brandy and spirits" was designed to boost the grain market and benefit farmers. Unfortunately, it led to a half-century of excessive gin consumption. Samuel Johnson noted that in Litchfield (his hometown), "all the decent people got drunk every night and were not the worse thought of." Francis Place (a tailor turned sociologist) said of the poor that their limited enjoyments "... are frequently reduced to two-sexual intercourse and drinking." Nonetheless, Charles Davenant, a popular journalist, wrote warningly of falling birthrates.

The author, an architect specializing in eighteenth-century buildings, highlights the brash, brawling environment that fed the gin craze: London awash with newcomers, rocked by financial speculation, and notorious for crime and prostitution. The comments of Swiss, French, and German visitors add to the narrative. Not unexpectedly, that indefatigable wordsmith, Daniel Defoe, manages to get in more than a few words, first for, then later against, cheap gin.

Awareness of the damage gin did was widespread. Nonetheless, "Madame Geneva" (the sobriquet reflects genever, the Dutch name for juniper, the spirit's flavoring agent) defied legislative control, despite the best efforts of an alliance between clear-headed politicians and jurists and a clutch of high-minded clerics. Dillon ably analyzes why, leading the reader through the political-financial factors distorting the legislative agenda. To remain in power and act effectively, the government needed both the landowners' votes and the taxes on gin. Changes in taxes or licenses to control the production and consumption of gin threatened a status quo and balance of interests that had powerful supporters, while law enforcement meant denouncing miscreants and risking public disorder.

Dillon engagingly narrates the events of the troubled half-century. The story is complex and the cast is large; he draws on a rich array of sources and voices. Though the national social good came a distant second to the maintenance of vested interests, there was significant social reform, particularly increased support and medical care of the deserving poor.

The crisis did alleviate, though not because of any specific governmental act, a fact Dillon suggests the U.S. government, facing drug and HIV crises, could well note.

Gin and tonic perfect each other; so do this book and Jessica Warner's *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in the Age of Reason* (reviewed in ForeWord's University Press issue, autumn 2002). Dillon sets the gin craze in a broader demographic, economic, and social setting than Warner, whose fine analysis is more narrowly focused. Each complements the other: both reward readers.

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