

BOOK REVIEW

*Rhiannon Pickin*¹

David Beckingham, *The Licensed City: Regulating Drink in Liverpool, 1830-1920*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017. 289 pp. £80.00 hardback. ISBN 9781781383438.

During the long nineteenth century, Liverpool was perceived to have had the worst problem with drunkenness than any other British city. In his book, *The Licensed City: Regulating Drink in Liverpool, 1830-1920*, David Beckingham provides a fascinating micro-historical approach to researching the history of a city that was seen as exceptional by historical contemporaries. Through relating local archival evidence to the wider historical context, Beckingham seeks to understand how 'drunkenness' in Liverpool was made visible during this period. Commonplace ideas about certain locations within the city and attitudes towards those who inhabited them, are examined in the introduction to his book. These assumptions were based on factors such as police reports of social disorder as a result of drunkenness, or prejudices against the city's Irish community who fled to the port following the Irish Famine. These social issues led to a surge in American-inspired Temperance Societies who sought to reform the city's reputation and to undo what many called 'the black spot on the Mersey'.²

As with other historiographic studies on public order control, the historical importance placed on people's liberties is emphasised. These freedoms in relation to alcohol licensing, which was awarded on a local level to publicans of 'good character', is the focus of the book's second chapter. Here, a person's liberty to access alcohol in public houses is described as having been at odds with individuals, particularly members of the Temperance Societies, who saw this as oppressive to their own liberties. The influence of these societies is explored in the third chapter, which analyses the rise of temperance politics in Liverpool during this period. Support for teetotalism was the result of numerous perceived social issues that also had an impact on the political landscape of the city, as local political figures embraced these views when promoting their own political campaigns. To support their claims, Temperance Societies and political campaigners conducted spacial studies of the city. In the book's fourth chapter Beckingham argues that there were specific locations within the city that were seen as areas where drunkenness was a particular problem. Archival evidence, such as maps constructed

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² D. Beckingham, *The Licenced City: Regulating Drink in Liverpool: 1830-1920* (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2017), p.2.

by the Popular Control and Licensing Reform Association, pinpoint the locations of public houses within the city. The author comes to the conclusion that such maps

...did more than locate problem drinking in Irish neighbourhoods, or in the theatre or sailortown districts of the city centre. They showed that there was more to such problem drinking than simply an errant drinker; there was a problematic system of regulation, whose reform was hampered by a combination of vested interests, engrained prejudices about the habits of the poor and resilient sectarian politics.³

Efforts to regulate licensed premises are explored further in chapter five, which looks at the perceived links between drunkenness and prostitution. Campaigns against these two vices naturally became ones that called for social purity. However, the policing of such crimes was complicated by issues such as the vague wording of the 1872 Licencing Act, which only allowed the police to remove prostitutes from public houses when they had 'remained longer than necessary'.⁴ Despite this, these social purity campaigns lit the way for further licensing reform. Following on from this in chapter six, the author examines how controls began to be imposed on women visiting licensed premises. Just as drunkenness was linked to the vice of prostitution in the previous chapter, the negative affect that alcohol had on working class women was seen to dissolve the moral stability of the city. This included a campaign against women who worked as barmaids in licensed premises as these were seen as places that were not suitable for women. A crackdown on women's access to these locations also resulted from measures enforced by the city's authorities.

By enforcing these reforms, in addition to the reduction of licensing in areas of slum clearance, Liverpool's success became widely known to other cities in Britain. Chapter seven examines the ways in which these reforms took hold within Liverpool, and how individuals from places such as Glasgow visited the city to see how they could repeat this social reform in their home cities. However, such successes came at a price, just as chapter eight demonstrates in its analysis of how compensation that was awarded to publicans for the loss of their licences, as was specified by national legislation, began to cause issues for reformers and local magistrates. It is emphasised how, at the turn of the twentieth century, various national Acts had an impact on the city's social reform measures that were being enforced at the time. Beckingham states in chapter nine that during World War One there was a return to older moralistic anti-drinking campaigns. However, a decrease in the amount of drunkenness taking place within the city led to changes in how problem drinking was understood. This, as well as the fact that drinking had been viewed at this time as having a positive affect on morale rather than being a social problem, led many to question the limits of temperance.

³ Ibid, p.121.

⁴ Ibid, p.134.

In the conclusion to his book, Beckingham relates this study to the modern day, with hopes that the findings will be of use in a time when drinking and social control are still political issues that are being debated by the government. *The Licensed City* is an enjoyable book derived from the author's 2009 PhD thesis. It makes a significant contribution to the historical study of alcohol and social control. By focusing on Liverpool, the author allows for a considerable in-depth analysis into how perceptions of alcohol consumption have impacted the socio-political landscape of this city. These findings would be pertinent for future research into the history of social control and alcohol licensing in other towns and cities.