Drinking in the Past

Six beverages that changed the world

Review by Gary Cross

A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 6 GLASSES
By Tom Standage
Walker & Co.
$25

What do six popular drinks tell us about the genesis of civilization? A lot more than you might assume, according to Tom Standage. As technology editor of *The Economist* and the author of several works of popular history (including *The Victorian Internet*, a record of the invention and early growth of the telegraph), he has a talent for compressing and enlivening arcane material. He treats the origins and impact of beer, wine, distilled spirits, coffee, tea, and cola in a neat and orderly fashion, linking each drink to a particular era and to the broad flow of history in an effort to demonstrate the "forces that shaped the modern world" and "the complex interplay of different civilizations and the interconnectedness of world cultures."

Beer, like domesticated plants, was discovered, not invented, sometime after 10,000 B.C.E. The natural result of gruel left out for several days, beer became the favored drink of people as they abandoned hunting and gathering for the more sedentary life of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent, an area encompassing parts of modern Iraq, as well as several other states. Standage notes that beer quickly acquired several important functions. It was both a social drink—the rituals surrounding it in Sumerian society gave rise to the persistent idea that drinking with someone "is a universal symbol of hospitality and friendship"—and because it was believed to possess supernatural properties. In both instances, Standage writes, early beliefs are still evident today: "The practice of raising a glass to wish someone good health, a happy marriage, or a safe passage into the afterlife, or to celebrate the successful completion of a project, is the modern echo of the ancient idea that alcohol has the power to invoke supernatural forces."

While beer was the byproduct of locally grown grains (especially barley), the production of wine depended on the specialized, even industrial, cultivation of grapevines, and the widespread love of wine led to expansive sea trade. Standage gives us a quick course in early Western civilization: the Greeks consumed a watered version at the social and intellectual gatherings of the symposia; the Romans used wine as "a symbol of social differentiation, a mark of the wealth and status of the drinker"; and the vineyard became inseparable from the imagery and habits of early Christians. The Muslim rejection of alcoholic drinks is attributed to a cultural reaction to the wine culture of Christianity and the Mediterranean world. At times, Standage's connections between the drink and the nature of civilization may seem a bit forced, but the story moves so quickly from glass to glass that the reader rarely has time to be annoyed.

For me the chapters on the origins of distilled spirits were the most interesting. Made first by Arab alchemists as part of their experiments, and seen as medicine, spirits distilled from wine (the process makes the alcohol content much stronger) quickly gained popularity in Europe for their ability to intoxicate. They also became an integral part of the European

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era of exploration, the development of an international sugar trade, and the trade in African slaves. Standage recalls the familiar story of the European search for lands suitable for sugar cane but focuses on a byproduct of cane refining—distilled molasses as rum (a shortened form of an old word for *brawl*). Rum fueled the slave trade. Europeans introduced this powerful and portable drink into African social life in exchange for slaves to work the New World sugar plantations, which in turn produced the molasses distilled in American colonies to be sent back to Africa. Rum was at first widely used by colonists, and sailors as well, but was gradually supplanted by grain-based spirits like whiskey as farmers moved westward across North America.

Alcoholic beverages were at the heart of Western civilization until about 1650, when two new sobering, but also stimulating, drinks arrived to challenge them, setting the stage for the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Caffeine-laced coffee, a drink that originated in Yemen in the 15th century, was "the wine of Islam," but by the mid-17th century it had also become the drink of the nascent British Enlightenment. It was a necessary lubricant for the revolutionary scientific and economic ideas emerging from London's coffeehouses, establishments that served, in Standage's words, "as information exchanges for scientists, businessmen, writers, and politicians." Coffee, and the special establishments selling it, became so popular that by 1700 London had hundreds of coffeehouses.

Tea, with its origins in China in the first century B.C.E., came to define that nation's civilization and characteristic sense of ceremony. Tea also contributed to the health and size of China's population, thanks to the tannic acid in the brew that killed disease-causing bacteria. The British adoption of tea not only transformed its domestic routines and rites, it also shaped its imperial policy, as the monopoly enforced by the East Indian Company led to the American Revolution. And the need of England to find a way to pay for huge amounts of imported tea led to the Opium War of 1839, after the company decided to force the Chinese to take opium, rather than cash, in exchange for tea.

The drink so closely identified with the British Empire was supplanted by one inextricably associated with the global power that followed: Coca-Cola. Standage retells the story of the Georgia businessman John Pemberton, who created the patent medicine-temperance drink-drugstore refreshment (inspired by a popular French patent medicine, Vin Mariani). He shows how decades of aggressive advertisements, first at home and then, following World War II, internationally, cemented the identification of the drink with the United States.

Standage's conceit is not simply a clever way of pulling together many of the main points of world history around the technology and commerce of drink; nor is it an uncritical or triumphal tale of a march through history of the glasses in question. Standage also tells a number of stories about conflict, as societies repeatedly tried to ban or restrict alcoholic or caffeinated drinks and as the drive for these mood-transforming beverages induced men to enslave one another and to wage war. He also calls attention to the downside of Coca-Cola's success in promoting its sugared and caffeinated drink to children. And he ends with a further irony, noting the contemporary world's obsession with water. When drawn from springs, it has become the drink of a health-conscious elite in the West, but in polluted form, it has caused rampant disease for the poor in much of the rest of the world.

Of course, the history of the world can't really be reduced to six glasses, and the history of the glasses cannot be reduced to a breezy survey of habits and empires. Standage tends to focus on the origins of these drinks, and in an attempt to tie the narrative together, dwells on linkages with the familiar plot lines of history. Many stories are neglected, such as the modern commercialization of beer, the rise of French and, later, Californian wines, the campaign against spirits and alcohol in the temperance and Prohibition movements, and the ties of soft drinks to the rise of modern consumer society. But this is still an enjoyable and enlightening book, so drink up!