

At War with King Alcohol: Debating Drinking and Masculinity in the Civil War

Brendan J. Payne

North Greenville University, brendan.payne@ngu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Payne, Brendan J. (2023) "At War with King Alcohol: Debating Drinking and Masculinity in the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.25.2.12

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol25/iss2/12>

Review

Payne, Brendan J. J.

Spring 2023

Bever, Megan L. *At War with King Alcohol: Debating Drinking and Masculinity in the Civil War*. UNC Press, 2022. PAPERBACK. \$27.95 ISBN 9781469669540 pp. 260

The academic study of temperance, the movement to limit or ban consumption of alcoholic beverages in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has tended to attract academic interest primarily in how it intersects with trendier topics. Gender, race, class, religion, social control, crime, the justice system, government expansion, Progressivism, and patriotism are among the topics that have had more relevance for scholars than temperance itself, which has seemed increasingly dated since the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933. While cross-pollination of topics is necessary to interesting historical study, it is particularly valuable in areas such as temperance.

This trend continues in this fine volume by Megan L. Bever, an associate professor of history and chair of the Social Sciences Department at Missouri Southern State University. In this book, Bever primarily interprets alcohol drinking during the Civil War through the lens of gender, particularly how competing ideals of masculinity clashed on the appropriate approach to alcohol consumption in the military, with a secondary emphasis on patriotism.

After a tidy introduction, the book's six chapters proceed topically. Chapter 1 covers the medical justification of the spirit ration in Union and Confederate militaries, while chapter 2 details how officers' generous drinking habits, reflecting aristocratic view of privilege from rank, inspired men who followed a more republican and egalitarian view of access to alcohol. Chapter 3 considers how overdrinking challenged military discipline, ideals of masculinity, and moral expectations, while the 4th chapter examines military regulations on alcohol and how civilian sellers interacted with them. Perhaps the most fascinating chapter was 5, which contrasted how Confederate and Union states regulated alcohol, more on that below. The 6th chapter discussed further the relationship between duty, disloyalty, and drinking, with nearly everyone agreeing that some form of self-sacrifice was necessary for patriotism, but teetotalism clashed with the ever-present alcohol

in the military, ostensibly for soldiers' health. The epilogue neatly observed how, despite temperance reformers' best efforts to persuade them, most veterans of the Civil War came back home in the 1860s convinced that some alcohol use was perfectly compatible with patriotic masculinity.

The book is persuasively argued, clearly written, and just the right size. It is carefully based upon a wide array of sources, including personal letters, official government records on supply and regulations, legislative journals for the state and national governments, and temperance publications, leading to a wide array of perspectives on the connection between masculinity and alcohol. Bever's argument unfolds meticulously with helpful definitions for terms and the right amount of detail, and she brings receipts for every claim. Nearly every paragraph includes quotes that perfectly fit the claims made therein. At the same time, the book is quite readable for an academic work, and it makes many interesting observations beyond its core argument.

Some facts and analysis are particularly fascinating. One embarrassing episode on page 64, in which a Union officer was crying profusely and screaming at his drunken men to keep them in line instead of cowering in a ditch during combat, was one of several that powerfully showed the potential of alcohol to undermine discipline. Another surprise is on page 33: Annie Wittenmyer, then a member of the Christian Commission, sent wine and spirits to soldiers, even though she later became a member (and president, 1874-1879) of the prohibitionist Woman's (not *Women's*, as Bever and other scholars frequently mistake) Christian Temperance Union. The book is woven through with such interesting anecdotes which, in Bever's skilled hands, form a compelling tapestry on masculinity, patriotism, and alcohol during the Civil War.

One snippet demanded more analysis. On page 38, an observer linked teetotaling to femininity for the cleanshaven Union General Robert McAllister, who was described as both a mother to his troops and a lioness in battle. This passage, a counterpoint to the book's refrain of how military excellence was perceived as masculine, seems to be compelling evidence that it could be coded as feminine as well. While this episode does not necessarily contradict the book's argument on patriotic and militant masculinity, and digression on this point would diverge from Bever's tight style of argumentation, it does merit more evaluation, perhaps in other studies.

One of the most interesting contributions of the work is chapter 5, which covers how the fundamental debates on drinking and masculinity were essentially the same in both the Union and Confederate militaries, yet policies of those governments towards alcohol differed due to

circumstances. Some Confederate states, partly because of shortages of food and drink, banned distilling for the first time during the conflict. In the Union North, meanwhile, prohibition laws unraveled during the war, partly due to greater supply of alcohol but also to the financial benefits of taxing ubiquitous liquor. In short, contrary to popular perception (such as Ken Burns' documentary on Prohibition), the Civil War did not merely undermine prohibition, but in certain Confederate states actually birthed prohibition laws. While, as Bever notes, restrictions on slave consumption of alcohol in the South went back to colonial times, the extension of prohibitory laws to white citizens was a dramatic innovation during the war. More studies are needed to flesh out this fascinating connection between prohibition in the South during the Civil War and the halting rise of prohibition in the South in the decades thereafter, which is underemphasized in current scholarship.

The limits of this study are freely admitted by the author and a consequence of appropriate scholarly focus. As noted on page 10, most of Bever's sources center the views and experiences of white men, though women, African Americans, and immigrants also receive adequate attention throughout. Likewise, Bever mostly avoids temperance debates not directly relevant to her thesis and dodges debates over how much particular generals (such as Grant) actually drank, preferring to focus on the *perceptions* of people at the time.

Bever's focus on her topic is admirable and exemplary for its thoroughness. I highly recommend this book for scholars, graduate students, and all readers interested in the connection between ideas of masculinity and alcohol in the Civil War.

Brendan J.J. Payne (bpayne@ngu.edu) is chair of the history department at North Greenville University. His book, Gin, Jesus, and Jim Crow (LSU Press 2022) discusses how alcohol prohibition helped transform racial and religious politics in the U.S. South from the 1880s to the 1930s.