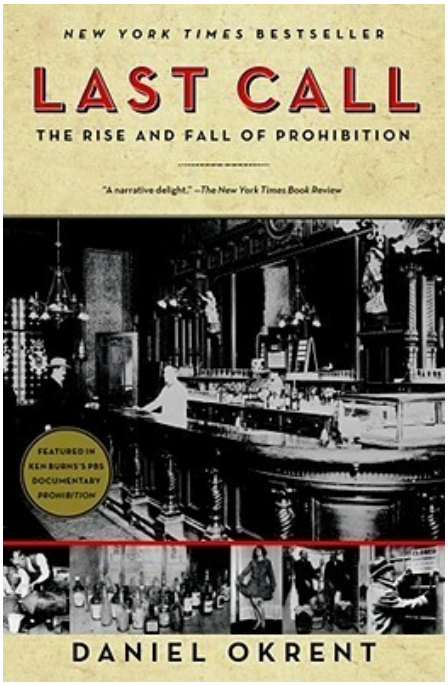

Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition

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A brilliant, authoritative, and fascinating history of America's most puzzling era, the years 1920 to 1933, when the U.S. Constitution was amended to restrict one of America's favorite pastimes: drinking alcoholic beverages.

From its start, America has been awash in drink. The sailing vessel that brought John Winthrop to the shores of the New World in 1630 carried more beer than water. By the 1820s, liquor flowed so plentifully it was cheaper than tea. That Americans would *ever* agree to relinquish their booze was as improbable as it was astonishing.

Yet we did, and *Last Call* is Daniel Okrent's dazzling explanation of why we did it, what life under Prohibition was like, and how such an unprecedented degree of government interference in the private lives of Americans changed the country forever.

Writing with both wit and historical acuity, Okrent reveals how Prohibition marked a confluence of diverse forces: the growing political power of the women's suffrage movement, which allied itself with the antiliquor campaign; the fear of small-town, native-stock Protestants that they were losing control of their country to the immigrants of the large cities; the anti-German sentiment stoked by World War I; and a variety of other unlikely factors, ranging from the rise of the automobile to the advent of the income tax.

Through it all, Americans kept drinking, going to remarkably creative lengths to smuggle, sell, conceal, and convivially (and sometimes fatally) imbibe their favorite intoxicants. *Last Call* is peopled with vivid characters of an astonishing variety: Susan B. Anthony and Billy Sunday, William Jennings Bryan and bootlegger Sam Bronfman, Pierre S. du Pont and H. L. Mencken, Meyer Lansky and the incredible—if long-forgotten—federal official Mabel Walker Willebrandt, who throughout the twenties was the most powerful woman in the country. (Perhaps most surprising of all is Okrent's account of Joseph P. Kennedy's legendary, and long-misunderstood, role in the liquor business.)

It's a book rich with stories from nearly all parts of the country. Okrent's narrative runs through smoky Manhattan speakeasies, where relations between the sexes were changed forever; California vineyards busily producing "sacramental" wine; New England fishing communities that gave up fishing for the more lucrative rum-running business; and in Washington, the halls of Congress itself, where politicians who had voted for Prohibition drank openly and without apology.

Last Call is capacious, meticulous, and thrillingly told. It stands as the most complete history of Prohibition ever written and confirms Daniel Okrent's rank as a major American writer.

Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition Details

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From Reader Review Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition for online ebook

Andrew says

A really interesting history of the part of prohibition we usually don't hear about it. Most prohibition documentaries/histories focus on the "What happened" rather than the "How it got this way" - which is the particular province that Okrent narrates. It's full of windbags, stump speakers, racists, politicos, and marginal figures who used temperance and the adjective "dry" to secure a national stage and temporary power. Most tellingly, as Okrent ironically notes, popular history whitewashed over the triumph, which led to one of only two amendments that GIVES power to the government, and only remembers the tragically ridiculously horrible outcome to this equally moral and political imperative.

Okrent is a good writer, and his style is suited for this kind of narrative, but I feel like I could have watched a good documentary about this, as opposed to reading a 350 page book. Still, it's a candid panoramic of an America that amazingly existed when my Grandmother was alive. Both America and its weird proclamations and weirder principles seem a way-distant remove from the one we live in today, but Okrent notes the surprising similarities as well as the obvious disparities.

Hana says

Five stars all the way. An entertaining, provocative, highly readable account of one of America's stranger political and social experiments--and one that has important modern day resonance and lessons.

Daniel Okrent weaves a brilliant tapestry of the many threads that brought the 18th Amendment into being. But this is not [AHEM!] a dry read. It's full of lively, often astonishing characters like the indomitable Carrie Nation who carried a hammer around, smashed up saloon after saloon and launched a women-led movement for temperance.

The fight against alcohol abuse became intertwined with women's demands for suffrage since "the most urgent reasons for women to want to vote in the mid-1800s were alcohol related. They wanted the saloons closed down...They wanted the right to own property and to shield their families' financial security from the profligacy of drunken husbands. They wanted the right to divorce those men, and to have them arrested for wife beating, and to protect their children...To change the laws they needed to vote."

The desperate plight of women and children trapped by the law and drunken husbands and fathers soon became linked in the public mind with growing resentment of 'big business' interests.

An emerging Progressive movement fostered by journalists and photographers and social activists like Jacob A. Riis raised awareness of the true cost of alcohol abuse, especially among the poorest.

While women led the progressive movement, passing the 18th Amendment needed a broader coalition. Wayne B. Wheeler was the political genius who made it happen. Wheeler invented single-interest politicking. Between 1901 and his death in 1927, Wheeler and his Anti Saloon League would make or break political fortunes, push strange bed-fellows together and capitalize on growing anti-immigrant and anti-German sentiment to make Prohibition the law of the land.

The progressives were hampered by conscience and the breadth of their concerns. Wheeler had no such scruples and readily enlisted allies as unsavory as the Ku Klux Klan whose agenda in those days was dominated by fear of immigrants, Catholics and Jews, as well as blacks.

But in the end it took America's entry into World War I against Germany to turn Prohibition and 'voting dry' into a patriotic duty.

That Prohibition failed pretty much from day one was, perhaps, inevitable given under-funding for enforcement coupled with American, Canadian and British ingenuity. The loopholes to be exploited were big enough to drive trucks through (and plenty of entrepreneurs did just that).

The Bronfmans were among the many Canadians who cashed in big time on Prohibition America's thirst. 'Rum running has provided a tidy bit toward Canada's favorable balance of trade,' said one financial newspaper. The U.S. Secretary of the Treasury noted "'You cannot keep liquor from dripping through a dotted line.'...The U.S. Canada border was so wet it's a wonder it didn't bleed off the maps."

Prohibition's end was just as fascinating as its beginning. Widespread social change was at the core and among the most powerful changes were those that affected the women who had once demanded Temperance. With enfranchisement of women came legal protections that gave them rights to divorce and property ownership. World War I's labor shortages had given women a taste for the satisfaction and independence of earning a paycheck. And more than a few daring flappers joined men at the speakeasy table and acquired somewhat less respectable tastes.

Despite its 1933 repeal, the 18th Amendment left an enduring legacy. Never again would Americans drink quite so much, so freely or so dangerously; alcohol would be regulated more effectively than it had been banned; it was harder in some ways to get a drink after repeal and wags recalled, with a certain wistfulness, "...the days of Prohibition when you could get a drink on Sundays."

Other more hardened legacies are still with us: prohibitions on cocaine, opium and marijuana all date from the same era and are only now being seriously re-examined. The era saw a vast expansion in state and federal powers: income tax, wiretapping, expanded search and seizure, J.Edgard Hoover and the FBI were the long shadows of Prohibition. Few voices questioned the expansion. One was Justice Louis Brandeis who, in his dissenting opinion on a Federal wiretapping case, argued against "invasions of individual security" and articulated a constitutional "right to be let alone"--words invoked by the majority half a century later in the landmark Supreme Court case, *Roe v. Wade* that liberalized U.S. abortion law.

For students of American social and political history--or anyone who loves great story telling--this is a must read. To see more quotes and great pictures click through to the updates.

Otis Chandler says

This is a fascinating glimpse into American history, of which I was largely ignorant - well worth a read. I had no idea prohibition lasted 14 years! My only criticism is the author spent way too much time on the politics of prohibition - that could have been cut by half.

The bottom line of prohibition is that is was a massive failure. It singlehandedly created organized crime, cost the government lots of money in lost taxes and enforcement, and failed to stop pretty much anyone from drinking.

It did have some upside though. Americans had a drinking problem and definitely drank less overall during prohibition, and even afterwards. But more importantly prohibition helped transform American culture. Prohibition coincided with massive immigration and population growth, which all happened in the cities. It was really a battle between urban culture and rural culture. It particularly didn't make sense in urban culture, and people rebelled, giving us "the roaring 20's". Prohibition helped us go from a stay at home culture to one where it was acceptable to go out and consume liquor.

Prohibition gave us income tax. The Anti-Saloon League (ASL), which was the organization that pushed prohibition through, pushed income tax through first because the government couldn't approve prohibition without finding an alternate source of revenue for the massive amount of tax money (30% of federal revenue) it made on liquor.

Many businesses got their starts in prohibition. Walgreens went from 20 to 525 stores during prohibition, because of the legal loophole that medicinal liquor was allowed, so drugstores were a major source of liquor sales. Coca Cola saw sales triple. The entire ecosystem of Nassau and the Bahamas was created. Sam Bronfman, the largest bootlegger in Canada, turned his operation into a legitimate business afterwards, owning many major liquor brands under the Seagrams brand.

The major failing of prohibition, and the reason it was eventually repealed, was the organized crime. Al Capone was the poster boy, but all the major mafia families got their start bootlegging, then got organized, then went on to bigger and better criminal activities. Yes it gave us Las Vegas, but it wasn't a good thing. If anything, this is the argument for the legalization of Marijuana (though there are other factors there).

In the end I think that prohibition was a bad idea because it was the government trying to tell Americans how to live. Individuals have to take responsibility for themselves.

Madeline says

"In 1920 could anyone have believed that the Eighteenth Amendment, ostensibly addressing the single subject of intoxicating beverages, would set off an avalanche of change in areas as diverse as international

trade, speedboat design, tourism practices, soft-drink marketing, and the English language itself? Or that it would provoke the establishment of the first nationwide criminal sydicate, the idea of home dinner parties, the deep engagement of women in political issues other than suffrage, and the creation of Las Vegas? As interpreted by the Supreme Court and as understood by Congress, Prohibition would also lead indirectly to the eventual guarantee of the American woman's right to abortion and simultaneously dash that same woman's hope for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution.
Prohibition changed the way we live, and it fundamentally redefined the role of the federal government. *How the hell did it happen?*"

In-depth, well-researched, and very readable - I think this book would be appreciated by both hardcore Prohibition scholars, and newcomers like me. As Okrent says in his introduction, the book has two main goals: examine how the Eighteenth Amendment was created, passed, and then repealed (the first Constitutional amendment to ever be repealed); and its effects on numerous and far-reaching aspects of American culture. Prohibition was more than an amendment; it represented a huge turning point in both the political and the everyday landscape of the United States. Okrent's book follows the trajectory of the Prohibition movement, beginning with the first significant push by the temperance movement in the late 1800's, ending with the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933. In between, we meet the major players of both the "wet" and the "dry" movements and see their various political manoeuverings, the ways life changed under Prohibition, and how bootleggers operated and the creative ways they circumvented the law. This was probably the most fun for me, and where I learned the most. For instance, something I learned from this book: home brewing was still legal under Prohibition, alcohol could be sold for "medicinal purposes", and wine could still be legally produced for religious purposes (which led to a huge boom in grape farming in California and, hilariously, fake rabbis popping up all over the country and claiming that they needed barrels of wine for their nonexistent temple services). Also, the famous claim that Joe Kennedy was a bootlegger is debunked here - although Kennedy sold alcohol during Prohibition, loopholes in the Eighteenth Amendment allowed him to do so within the confines of the law.

One last thing, and this is more of a caveat than a criticism: this book is focused primarily on the political aspects of Prohibition, instead of the more sensationalist elements, such as mobsters and speakeasies. Of course, that was what really interested me - I wanted to read more about speakeasies and how they operated, the rise of mob culture, and generally how Prohibition affected the average American. Not that the political stuff isn't interesting, of course, and Okrent does oblige us by tossing in some anecdotes about bootleggers or Al Capone every few chapters, but for the most part, he's concerned mainly with showing us the political maneouvers that created, maintained, and ultimately destroyed Prohibition. Interesting stuff, sure, but if you're looking for a lighthearted flapper-filled romp through speakeasies, look elsewhere.

Max says

Born in the 1840’s the prohibitionist movement was a response to the endemic drunkenness in America. An American then consumed on average three times as much alcohol as an American today! The movement gained significant strength in the late 19th century with the formation of the WCTU (Women’s Christian Temperance Union) and the ASL (Anti-Saloon League). The ASL was politically very effective. Singularly focused it sought out any and all allies even progressives. Thus it helped pass workman’s compensation laws not only in return for support from labor but also to make companies take notice of the cost of drunken workers. The ASL supported the income tax so that the liquor tax would no longer be needed. Most significant was its support for women’s suffrage. The alliance between these two groups was a natural. In the states where women could vote dry candidates got elected. But the prohibition movement also aligned with

racists supporting Jim Crow laws playing on fears that liquor inspired violence by blacks against whites. The prohibitionist force was felt in many ways.

The prohibitionists knew they had to strike in 1916. The country's demographics were rapidly changing. From majority rural in 1910, the U.S. would become majority urban in 1920 and the redistricting would shatter the prohibitionist's chances. The ASL and allies put everything into the 1916 congressional elections and together they succeeded in electing dry candidates across the nation. In Congress the issue was political, not moral. Almost none of those voting for the 18th amendment prohibiting "the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors" were abstainers known as "dry-drys". Most members of Congress voting for prohibition were drinkers. They were "wet-drys". After passage in Congress, ratification sailed through state legislatures which were not apportioned according to population and heavily favored rural over urban areas. The one person, one vote rule for state legislative districts did not become law until a 1962 Supreme Court decision. The Volstead Act implementing the 18th amendment passed in January 1919 and went into effect in January 1920.

While the drys had their law, the wets would still have their liquor. Congress allocated next to nothing for enforcement. Neither did most states. States with large immigrant populations had little use for the law. The law was completely disregarded by many including President Harding. Bootlegging was endemic and booze readily available, particularly in cities such as New York, Detroit, Chicago, Baltimore, New Orleans and San Francisco. The Volstead Act required a jury trial for anyone charged with a liquor violation. The judicial system had been underfunded before prohibition and courts had no means to deal with the added liquor cases. Where trials did occur, juries rarely convicted.

Huge enterprises were established in Canada to supply America's thirst. Most notable was Sam Bronfman who became filthy rich and purchased Seagram's to build his empire. Bronfman and others made deals with British scotch distillers and brought in massive amounts of scotch through the Bahamas and St. Pierre Island off the Newfoundland coast. St. Pierre, a French territory, was also used to stage Canadian liquor both for shipment to the US and back to Canada to avoid domestic taxes. Mother ships were anchored outside the three mile limit up and down the US Coast. Known as "Rum Row", they served as floating warehouses. Liquor also came across from Canada all along the border. Notable were the innumerable small boats constantly crossing the Detroit River labeled the "Mosquito Fleet." Equally effective were the trains legally transshipping huge quantities of liquor from Canada to Mexico that entered Mexico with their cargo mysteriously gone.

Alcohol reached parched throats many other ways. An exception to alcohol production in the Volstead Act was made in favor of Congress' rural constituents. Farmers were allowed to ferment fruit juice. Every farmer had his own supply and most made a few extra dollars at cider stands that dotted the countryside. An adjustment was made to allow people to make wine in their home. Markets in some urban areas were nothing but purple. This provision along with the exception for sacramental wine saved California's grape growers. The prices for their crops skyrocketed. Many pastors, priests and rabbis "shared" with their suddenly enlarged "congregations". Many, now suddenly called to "religious" leadership, started new "congregations". And there were medical exceptions. Doctors, pharmacists and even veterinarians wrote prescriptions for bourbon, gin, scotch or the liquor of your choice. Take three swigs of Old Grand Dad and call me in the morning. Fido should just take two. Pharmacists stocked large supplies and many dispensed without a prescription. The brewers, not to be left out, sold the malt syrup and yeast for home brew which was very popular.

Prohibition accelerated the social change that was enveloping America after WWI. Women had not been allowed in saloons, but were welcome in speakeasies. The term "powder room" originated when speakeasies

added women's bathroom facilities. In addition to wearing shorter skirts and bobbed hair, women started drinking publicly. Men without a flask or bottle had a tough time getting a date. A new type of party became popular where men and women mingled, danced and drank sans dinner. Of course, the new fast life was primarily in cities. Despite conspicuous consumption in places like New York and Detroit, alcohol consumption for the nation as a whole did decline during prohibition as many in rural America honored the law.

The drys kept up the political fight. Prohibition was largely championed by Anglo Saxon Protestant Americans. Recognizing the impact of changing demographics, the drys sought to limit the influence of Catholic, Irish, Italian, German, Jewish and other ethnic Americans. In 1924 the drys got new immigration quotas. These limited immigrants to 2% of their American ethnic population based on the 1890 census. Back then these groups comprised a much smaller part of the populace. The drys also tried to do away with redistricting which would disenfranchise millions in the cities where anti-prohibition ethnic groups lived. This effort fortunately failed.

The 1928 presidential election emboldened the drys. Al Smith's crushing defeat was largely due to the anti-Catholic vote. But drys mistakenly took the election as a mandate for getting tougher on prohibition violators. The Jones Act quickly followed easily passing in Congress. It made Volstead Act violators felons subject to five years sentences and large fines. The Jones Law made even the pettiest violators felons including mere observers to illegal drink sales who failed to report them to authorities. People were taken aback by the idea that someone purchasing a jug of cider or even a glass of wine could be locked up for five years.

The connection between increasing gang violence and prohibition was not lost on the public. Pre-prohibition neighborhood gangs became sophisticated enterprises. To eliminate wasteful competition the gangs carved up territories and even set up ways to adjudicate disputes. Prohibition brought on the start of nationwide crime syndicates. The notorious Al Capone, a murderous thug, tried to craft a glamorous and sympathetic image claiming "Public service is my motto." And when the depression started he even opened a soup kitchen for the poor serving 5,000 on Thanksgiving.

The final straw was the depression. The Republicans, largely dry, were blamed. This enabled Democratic wet candidates to win in the 1930 election. Many business people had opposed prohibition from the beginning. The powerful Pierre DuPont and many other businessmen opposed any form of government regulation. They also saw alcohol taxes as a way to get rid of income and corporate taxes. The falling tax revenues of the depression made funding government a dire problem. This resulted in cutbacks in already skinny enforcement budgets. At the same time came an increasing number of revelations of government corruption and dry political leaders who really were avid drinkers. In 1932 FDR and the Democrats ran on repeal. The 21st Amendment repealing the 18th quickly passed Congress after his election. By December of that year the 36th state, Utah, ratified the amendment and America celebrated.

Okrent offers a well-researched history of a period that goes much deeper than the gangster, flapper image we see in movies. He details the politics. We see the same forces and divides that are at work today even though the issue of prohibition is far behind us. Race and cultural differences played fundamental roles. Okrent describes the powerful men and women who rose and fell with the prohibition movement. Most of them now are no more than a footnote in history. Last Call is a great read that brings to life a time of dramatic change.

Daniel says

In the late 1920s, the leadership of the city of Philadelphia announced efforts to combat police corruption by moving police officers suspected of accepting bribes to new precincts away from their bootlegging cronies. Out of 4200 officers on the force, 3800 were transferred--only 1 cop in 10 was considered honest by the city of Philadelphia. The Coast Guard invested millions in designing faster ships; some factories doubled their profits by selling equivalent ships to bootleggers. In Williamson County, IL ('Bloody Williamson' in the newspapers of the day), local political leaders decided to combat police corruption by turning to the largest dry grassroots organization in the nation--the Ku Klux Klan. Klan members, deputized by the Bureau of Prohibition, carried out a years long war on corrupt cops and the bootleggers who paid their salaries, with poor immigrant families caught in the middle.

In all of American history, Prohibition may well be the most absurd--middle class Protestant reformers, a large proportion of which could not even vote (being women), successfully prohibited the fifth largest industry in America at the time, an industry that, through excise taxes, had traditionally provided a substantial faction of federal revenue. Support from drys proved decisive in securing the progressive income tax (to replace revenue), gaining the vote for women (who were presumptive Prohibition supporters), securing workers compensation laws (so that employers would prevent workers from drinking on the job) and drastically restricting immigration (who were largely Catholic wets).

The coalition behind Prohibition included radical labor organization and the Klan, Democrats and Republicans. It was generally speaking an outgrowth of native-born Protestant reformism, and gained substantially from nativism (hence the Klan support); for Catholic immigrants, saloons were places to find a job, to cash a check, to buy a meal and rent a room. Many machine politicians were saloon-owners, including scion Patrick Kennedy of Boston. And the predominance of Germans in the brewing industry became particularly problematic during the hysteria surrounding World War I. It was also a way for women to speak (in a way limited by the conservatism of the time) about the realities of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other ills that were exacerbated by alcohol.

But few Americans were passionate drys. The genius behind Prohibition was a political organizer named Wayne Wheeler, leader of the Anti-Saloon League, who realized early the power of a dedicated minority that will reliably turn out to vote on a single issue. The ability to reliably deliver ten to twenty percent of the vote created a voting majority large enough to pass a Constitutional Amendment. Wheeler would personally sit in Congress to observe critical votes to make his presence felt. And most significantly, Wheeler was willing to embrace the 'wet-drys', the Congressmen and Senators who voted dry and drank like wets.

As a result, Congress supported Prohibition while short-changing Prohibition enforcement: no new jails were built, no new judgeships created, and Prohibition agents were offered a tiny salary only attractive because of the opportunity to accept bribes. In a dynamic reminiscent of the war on drugs, federal prosecutors were encouraged to post high arrest and conviction rates, forcing an assembly line approach to low-level offenders that distracted from pursuit of the real bootleggers. And because bootlegging was a victimless crime, law enforcement increasingly made use of intrusive surveillance. Traditional Fourth Amendment protections were substantially watered down, including a 1927 case saying that the police did not need a warrant to tap a phone conversation. And with the rich and powerful able to break the law without consequence (drinks did not stop at the White House with Prohibition), a general contempt inevitably set in that helped spark the law's collapse as quickly as it had been enacted.

Daniel Okrent's telling of the story is strikingly modern in a lot of ways; and he is a wildly entertaining

storyteller that wrote a popular history without seeming to skimp on the complexity of the social forces involved or focus overly much on heroic individuals. And the Prohibition story is very contemporary--the parallels to the war on drugs are obvious (and even a bit of a cliche), but the political machinations of the ASL are also very reminiscent of powerful lobbies like AIPAC or the NRA. Last Call felt very fresh to me, and nearly every other page had an astounding or infuriating fact to me.

Matt says

Erfurt, Germany. Summer 1998. I am on a month-long tour with my high school class. I am in a bar, about to have the first drink of my life. I am 18 years old, a stickler for the rules. But I have found a loophole. The Underage American Tourist in Europe Clause. I lift the drink to my lips. It burns something bad. I do not know what it is, because I am not an all-star in my German class, and am unable to translate the word. It does not matter. I take another sip. And then another. I turn to the girl next to me, and ask her whether she ever wonders about how weird the word *wienerschnitzel* is. It turns out she has wondered that very thing. Soon we are making out.

My life changed that day.

I was intoxicated after three drinks, and then got lost on the way back to the hostel. The next day I had a headache, of which I was quite proud. Booze, magical booze, allowed me to be the person I wanted to be. My shyness disappeared, and I was free to utter all the lame pick-up lines, double entendres, and witty sexual banter that I had stored up in my head since reaching puberty.

I love to drink. I think getting responsibly drunk is one of the greatest things ever, though it hurts more now than it used to. In my experience, it has greased romantic wheels, engendered hilarious debates, and provided the basic ingredient for the game “I Never,” which is the most useful tool devised by God to learn incredible, nasty, surprising, and horrible things about your friends.

Of course, I’m not oblivious to the other side of booze. The demon-drink side. In my job, I’ve come across lives wrecked by drink. I’ve seen men who need a sip so bad they are unable to keep themselves from stealing a handle of Barton’s vodka, even though it’s a third-offense shoplifting and they’re going to end up with six months in jail for something that costs $10 and tastes like it was distilled through a dirty bath towel.

Drunks are a menace on the roads. Alcohol fuels domestic violence. Imbibing makes it hard to get to work in the morning. Sometimes it causes you to throw up for 24 straight hours. Prolonged usage can damage your liver.

The dark side of alcohol led to the Temperance Movement, which began way back in the 1840s. It was spearheaded by women. Though they didn’t have the right to vote, they were getting tired of their husbands drinking away their salaries before coming home and beating them and their families.

It’s hard to overstate how much Americans used to drink. Liquor was cheaper than tea, safer than water, and used as currency in many western States during the years of the early republic. In the 1830s, Americans were drinking, per capita, 7 gallons of pure alcohol. Now that’s a lot of *Do you have a Band-Aid, because I just scraped my knee falling in love with you*.

Like everything that is awesome, alcohol has a good side and a bad side. There is the “Yay, I’m drunk” side,

and the “I’m oblivious to the people I’ve just run over in my Escalade” side. There is tension between the moral advantages of forced sobriety and the free-will advantages of being able to do something that, when done responsibly, is mostly harmless fun. (Your liver may beg to differ).

Daniel Okrent’s *Last Call* is the story of that time period in American life – 1920 to 1933 – when the anti-liquor forces won the day. That period, following the ratification of the 18th Amendment (as Okrent points out, it is one of two Amendments, the other being the 13th Amendment, that serve as checks on individual freedom, rather than checks on governmental power), is known as Prohibition.

Most of my Prohibition knowledge is filtered through gangster movies and gangster television shows. In other words, everything I know about Prohibition can be distilled (word play!) into one sentence: Kevin Costner arrested Al Capone.

Okrent’s story isn’t about that at all. Indeed, if you are looking for gangsters and Tommy-gunplay and Untouchables, you should probably stick to media you have undoubtedly already digested. There are maybe three mentions of Al Capone, two mentions of Eliot Ness, and only brief, passing glimpses at the bloody gang warfare that has me hooked on *Boardwalk Empire*. (Well played, HBO, you’ve sucked me in once again).

Instead, with *Last Call*, you get a broad yet brief survey of the ascension, execution, and fall of a political movement.

In my opinion, it is the rise of the Prohibition movement that is the most interesting, and the most pertinent to today’s politics. It involved a lot of strange bedfellows willing to come together to do one thing, for different reasons. For instance, you had women, who were on the wrong end of drunken husbands, teaming up with the Ku Klux Klan, who were scared of drunken Catholics and drunken blacks.

To make Prohibition possible, these disparate minorities cleared some incredible hurdles. First, they had to pass the 17th Amendment, which created the income tax, so that the government could suffer the loss of alcohol-tax revenue. Next, they had to stockpile a “dry” Congress. They did this using minority bloc tactics: in close races, the Temperance Movement would vote as one for the dry candidate, thereby swinging close races. In this manner, they were able to ratify a Constitutional Amendment that a simple majority of Americans were opposed to.

(Though Okrent refuses to make any analogies to the present day, the single-issue voting by temperance supporters is similar to today’s pro-life movement. That is, a single-issue voter will vote for a candidate based on nothing else but that issue, no matter what other qualifications the candidate has. In Nebraska, for instance, I heard a candidate for the Registrar of Deeds claim he was pro-life. Really? I care? Because I just want you to *register* deeds.)

The middle section of the book, while still interesting, is more familiar territory. It demonstrates that Prohibition was an epic farce, unenforceable from inception. It led to the rise of organized crime, the corruption of both local and federal law enforcement, and trampled civil rights (the War on Alcohol began the evisceration of the 14th Amendment that the War on Drugs has finished). The best/worst part of it is that the government never had any intention of fully enforcing the Volstead Act (the statutes deemed necessary and proper to execute the 18th Amendment). The Prohibition Bureau was chronically underfunded, its agents were not civil servants, and in the early days, the punishment for violations was laughable. (At first, violators could only be convicted of a misdemeanor and fined. The resulting volume of petty criminals ushered into Federal Courts nearly swamped the system, and gave rise to mass plea bargaining. Okrent tells how some

bootleggers hired people to go to court for them, plead guilty, and pay the fine).

The final third of the book tells of Prohibition's unraveling. It's not a dramatic story, since Prohibition was never really raveled in the first place. The movement to overturn the 18th Amendment was spearheaded not by Brewers and Distillers, who'd fought so hard against its ratification, but by the super-rich, who thought they could overturn the 17th Amendment if they first got rid of the 18th. (That is, they could get rid of income taxes if they could replace that shortfall with a liquor tax).

Okrent tells this story in a very brisk, wry manner. *Last Call* is very fast reading. As a survey, it refuses to get bogged down in sticky details. It jumps around a lot, and relies on illuminating anecdotes rather than long narrative arcs.

The most surprising thing I found was Okrent's light, balanced touch. It'd be very easy to make fun of men like Wayne Wheeler and William Jennings Bryan, who made abstaining from liquor their life's work. I mean, the temptation is to sneer at men and women who tried to halt a private act that had been enjoyed and cultivated for thousands of years by sheer dint of their own hyper-inflated sense of moral superiority. Ahem. See how easy it is to give into that temptation?

Clearly, Okrent feels, as I do, that Prohibition was a poor choice. (To quote Jeff Goldblum from *Jurassic Park 2*, it was "the worst idea in the history of bad ideas"). Yet he writes without any hint of meanness, or with the intellectual superiority that comes with 90 years of hindsight. He writes, almost bemusedly, of hypocritical "dries" in Congress, who voted for Prohibition while never abstaining themselves, and he notes, dispassionately, the vindictiveness of later dry laws, which made a third conviction under the Volstead Act an automatic life sentence in prison. This is the stuff that, even almost a century later, gets me spitting mad. Okrent, though, never lectures or critiques; he just tells his story. Even more impressive – as an act of will, I mean – is how he adamantly refuses to draw any parallels to today's brewing fight over marijuana legalization.

A sign of Okrent's fairness is the way he shows Prohibition's upside. Yeah, sure, there were gangs and assassinations and people dying from poisoned liquor. But Prohibition also decreased the per capita consumption of alcohol, and paved the way for Sunday blue laws, a legal drinking age, and so forth.

Last Call avoids teaching you a lesson. So I will fill in the gap. The lesson – in drinking, politics, life – is moderation. If you're 21, you should be able to hit the sauce as hard as you want. And then you should call a cab, or your wife, or you should stumble home on your own two feet, always reminding yourself that the alley behind the bank is not a toilet. I try to live this lesson. For example, I have maintained my sobriety throughout this review.

I hope you have not done the same.

Rebecca says

Required reading for anyone interested in abolishing the disastrous War on Drugs that's corrupted the American justice system (and, on a lesser note, made hypocrites of us all) for over a quarter of a century.

Last Call is informative and entertaining. Even an old American history geek like me learned something new: almost entirely due to the phenomenal political skills of one man, Wayne Wheeler of the Anti-Saloon League, such wildly different groups as the Industrial Workers of the World and the Ku Klux Klan came together to achieve a single goal--passage of the Eighteenth Amendment.

Perhaps those of us who believe in the full legalization, regulation and taxation of all drugs should take note: we need to find our own Wayne Wheeler to beat back the considerable opposition of the military-industrial complex, the drug cartels, the private prison industry, spineless politicians, and snooping moralists.

J.L. Sutton says

The best part of Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition is Daniel Okrent's account of the forces which allied with the temperance movement (notably the Ku Klux Klan, proponents of women's suffrage and evangelical Christians) to ratify the 18th Amendment (Prohibition). These groups don't necessarily seem like natural allies, but in the context of this patriotic campaign to outlaw the sale of alcohol, they somehow found common interest. They also found a common enemy in the 'lawless hordes' of immigrants who were entering the United States.

Demonizing immigrants was in full swing even before ratification and this hostility toward immigrants and ethnic minorities intensified during the 1920s. How Americans circumvented the new law of the land (the middle sections of this book) seemed like familiar territory and wasn't nearly as compelling. Less discussed was the meteoric rise of organized crime during the Prohibition-era. This would probably be familiar territory for most readers as well, but the explicit connection to the rise of organized crime in this country deserves space in any account of Prohibition's lasting impact.

There were passing references to gangsters and bootleggers and a mention of crime families in the epilogue, but the question of whether or not Joseph Kennedy was a bootlegger received more attention. This was a bit inexplicable to me; that hadn't seemed like the purpose of the book.

The unraveling and eventual repeal of the 18th Amendment; however, made many of the final sections of the book interesting. 3.5 stars rounded up to 4 stars.

Bruce MacBain says

When Wayne B. Wheeler died in 1927, an obituary in the Washington Post stated, "No other private citizen of the United States has left such an impress upon national history." Wayne who? Well, Mr. Willard was for a decade the chief lobbyist for the Anti-Saloon League and, indeed, politicians quaked whenever this small, unprepossessing man entered the room.

But Wheeler is not the only prohibition-era titan to have utterly vanished from our national memory. There was Frances Willard, "immortal founder" of the Women's Christian Temperance Union; there was Mabel Willebrandt, Assistant Attorney General for Prohibition Enforcement, whom Daniel Okrent in this fascinating new history calls "without question the most powerful woman in the nation." And there was Izzy Einstein, star prohibition agent who made over four thousand bootlegger arrests. (Eliot Ness of Untouchables

fame was a pipsqueak.)

Okrent, in lively ironic prose, presents a detailed analysis of the interplay of class, ethnicity, and religion that made, and then unmade, the eighteenth amendment to Constitution. The reader will learn why German brewers and Jewish distillers failed to unite against the forces of temperance. And why prohibition was supported simultaneously by northern progressives and the Ku Klux Klan. The book is filled with jaw-dropping facts. How, for example, the loophole which allowed for the production and sale of sacramental wine to Catholic bishops and Jewish rabbis was turned into a gigantic swindle. And one could go on and on. For anyone with an interest in American history Last Call is a must read.

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Gene Helsel says

What do the rise of feminism, pietism, socialism, The Klan, xenophobia (the irrational fear of people from other places), Henry Ford, nativism, income tax, organized crime, "big-brother" and big government have in common? As Daniel Okrent cogently and very entertainingly explains: The 18th Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibiting the manufacture and sale of "intoxicating beverages" in the USA, or "Prohibition" for short.

Okrent's insights regarding the rise and fall of prohibition are lucid and informative, and his prose is colorful and readable. Would that all history books were this enjoyable to read!

The chapters on Wayne Wheeler were worth the price of the book alone. Wayne Wheeler who once wielded more influence upon both houses of Congress than any individual or PAC before or since his "reign" as the director of the "Anti Saloon League."

Erin says

4.5 Stars

The 18th Amendment also known as The Volstead Act tried to do something that politicians have been trying to do since the founding of the nation. It tried to legislate morality. Its a fact that before Prohibition Americans drank a lot and new Americans drank even more than most, but the 18th Amendment sought to punish everyone for the personal failings of some and in the process made things worse.

Here's a small list of things(both good and bad)that Prohibition gave us: Organized Crime, The Budweiser Clydesdales, NASCAR, binge drinking, booze cruises, higher income taxes, integrated restaurants(in some towns & cities), ladies night, The Bahamian tourist industry, better built cars, the rise of the soft drink industry, the reemergence of The KKK, the 19th Amendment, and loss of respect for Congress.

As you can see from that list Prohibition had a massive effect on American society, just not that effect its biggest cheerleaders had planned. Prohibition of Alcohol was suppose to end violent crime, keep marriages together and happy, and bring an end to starving children. It accomplished none of those things and it may

have actually helped trigger The Great Depression. The U.S. government lost 11 billion dollars in taxation and enforcement of Prohibition laws cost more than 300 million dollars. In the Midwest alcohol provided 1/3 of the good paying jobs and Prohibition put all those people out of work.

Daniel Okrent's The Last Call covers Prohibition in a way that few people have, he introduces you to the different people who spent over a hundred years trying to outlaw alcohol and he spends very little time on the more "glamorous" aspects we all know about like Flappers, Gangsters, and Nightclubs. Instead Okrent shines a light on the strange bedmates that Prohibition created. Prohibition was a bipartisan effort both Republicans and Democrats disingenuously pushed the dry effort. It takes a special cause to unite Progressives, The Klan, Conservatives, Feminist, and Anti-Immigration activists.

As with most things in The United States racism and xenophobia were major factors in the push for Prohibition, originally "The Drys" only wanted to ban Beer, which was mostly made and drank by German immigrants and Wine which was popular among Italian & Irish immigrants. Germans, Italians, and Irish immigrants were the Mexican and Central American immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th century. They were accused of bringing crime and disease to America and also stealing jobs that belonged to "Pure Americans". Banning alcohol was seen as a way of making them either leave the country or assimilate. Banning alcohol was also seen as a way to stop the Lynching of African Americans because if you took alcohol away than Black men would stop raping innocent white women and without alcohol Blacks would be less savage.

As we all know Prohibition was a failure and its Repeal was escalated by The Great Depression and election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. While Prohibition may have ended almost 90 years ago we still live with its effects, here in Kentucky it was still illegal to sale alcohol on Sundays and Election Day that's a law left over from Prohibition. Kentucky and many other states have "Dry" counties or cities. The repeal of Prohibition brought age limits on who can buy alcohol. Sales taxes increased on most products because of the repeal of Prohibition. The F.B.I. was invented after the repeal of Prohibition, the Federal Government became even more powerful because of Prohibition.

The Last Call is filled with colorful characters and its a great look at American political history.

Recommended to all the history buffs out there.

Popsugar Reading Challenge: A Microhistory.
BookRiot Read Harder Challenge: A book of social science.
Hooked on Books June Read-A-Thon.
Summer Reading Challenge: Read A Book That's Been Sitting On Your GR Shelves For A While.

Mara says

The good news? Prohibition helps women get the right to vote. The bad news? The rise of “saloon economics,” racism and anti-immigration thrive, and people were poisoned by The Jake. Also, we've got some serious inaccuracies in our “Prohibition mythology,” including Malory's take on the lawfulness of Joe Kennedy's lucrative spirits-importation business, which was actually the beneficiary of a nuance in the Volstead Act (I'm sure it will come to a shock to everyone that the rich fared better than the poor).

Dwight says

Last Call is a great introduction to America’s experiment with alcohol prohibition and a highly superior substitute for the Hollywood education that was my prior reference point. Mr. Okrent does a great job of introducing us to the cast of characters that influenced legislation, policy and enforcement, as well as the special interest groups that played such a large role in both the rise and fall of prohibition.

Though the anecdotes regarding bootleggers and rum runners are entertaining, the formation and disintegration of political alliances surrounding the alcohol issue were especially fascinating. From the unlikely partnership that gathered under the umbrella of the Anti-Saloon League to pass the 18th amendment that brought together the likes Protestants, Progressives, Klansmen, Nativists and Suffragettes, to the crime bosses that often sided with “dry” forces after passage to sustain the law (but not the enforcement).

Mr. Okrent also explains how government revenue was in the forefront of both the adoption and repeal. The initiation of the income tax under the 17th amendment becomes the key prerequisite to passage of the 18th because it replaces alcohol excise tax revenue. Repeal efforts align the “wets” with the most affluent in the nation as they seek a means to avoid high income taxation. As income tax revenue dries up during the Great Depression, the final barriers to repeal fall.

Overall, Last Call is an enlightening journey through territory that has renewed relevance due to the marijuana legalization conversations of today.

Clif Hostetler says

To many alive today, prohibition is best remembered as depicted in movies of Al Capone and Eliot Ness. Well, there's a lot more to it than that. There was a long history leading up to the era, and then bringing it to an end is an interesting story too.

I found the history of alcohol consumption in the U.S. to be of particular interest. See the following link to a graph showing the history of U.S. Alcohol Consumption:
LINK: U.S. Alcohol Consumption
After looking at the above graph one might wonder if our founding fathers were drunk. Up until 1839 Americans were drinking about three times the alcohol that is currently consumed per capita. This book suggests that the primary reason for the drop off after 1839 was the shift to drinking beer rather than distilled liquor due largely to German immigrants, and to the beginning of the Washingtonian Movement (proponents of temperance but not necessarily prohibition).

Another reason for high alcohol consumption then was cheap prices and abundant supply for distilled liquors. The abundant supply was caused by the farmers out west (beyond the Appalachian Mountain Range) having plenty of grain but nobody to sell it to. There was no economical way to transport the grain to eastern markets at a time before canals, developed roads and river boats. Converting a wagon load of grain into a couple jugs of liquor made shipment of a marketable product back east much more feasible. Thus there was a surplus of liquor which resulted in low prices.

Those of you who remember your American history lessons will recall President Washington's problems with the Whiskey Rebellion. That was caused by the Federal Government taxing the whiskey being brought over the mountains from the west. Alexander Hamilton justified the whiskey tax as being fair because it was a commodity that was purchased by almost everybody.

It took an incredible confluence of interests to permit the passage of the 18th Amendment. Many today may forget that it was not just a law, it was actually a part of the Constitution. Getting an amendment added to the Constitution is not an easy thing to do. Then once it's passed, getting the amendment removed is just as difficult as passage was in the first place. This books tells the history of how this all happened.

Some things I learned from this book:
1. Reapportionment as called for in the Constitution following each census did not take place following the 1920 Census until 1929. Why the delay? Everyone knew that reapportionment was going to reduce the influence of western rural states that just happened to be the strongest supporters of Prohibition.
2. Prohibition supporters included some strange bed-fellows ranging from northern progressives to the Klu Klux Klan. (The Klu Klux Klan had significant growth of members in the northern states during this era because of its anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant positions.)
3. If you were a supporter of Prohibition in 1920 you most likely were White Anglo-Saxon Protestant living in a rural part of the country.
4. If you were opposed to Prohibition in 1920 you were likely to be Catholic, of Irish or Italian ancestry, a first or second generation immigrant, and living in an urban area.
5. The Prohibition movement was a significant cause for the initiation of the income tax in the United States. It was needed to make up the difference from the lost revenue from taxing booze.

The failure of prohibition is perhaps an indication of the folly of trying to legislate morality against the will of a large portion of the population. There are still plenty of people around who still want to do it today in other ways.

The following link is to an excerpt that discusses American intoxication in the early 1800s. It's taken from another book.
https://mailchi.mp/delanceyplace.com/...
