

The World Guide to Beer

Jeff Evans

'A man who doesn't care about the beer he drinks may as well not care about the bread he eats.' With these words Michael Jackson embarked upon a long and inspirational crusade to raise the profile of beer.

Jackson prepared this bold statement as the first line of his book *The World Guide to Beer*, first published in 1977. To put things into context, those were the days of flares and sideboards, of Star Wars and punk rock. Moreover, those were the days when beer was highly parochial. British people drank British beer - even the 'foreign' lagers they were acquiring a taste for were mostly brewed in the UK. American drinkers held fast to their light lagers, Australians quenched their thirst with a similarly bland offering, and the countries of Europe remained behind their still-existent frontiers, knowing and appreciating for the most part only the beers created within their own borders.

Today, of course, beer is international. This is not entirely positive. We have global conglomerates using the free market to destroy local brewing scenes and snuff out indigenous beer cultures. But, on the other hand, the easy-come, easy-go world we live in means that the

many great beers that do survive can be enjoyed thousands of miles from their place of birth, and those beers that don't make the journey can be savoured by drinkers who go to them instead. The fact that people are prepared to travel half way around the world in search of great beer reveals that Michael's message has got through. No longer do drinkers only see beer as a commodity. It is a gourmet product, a drink with character, provenance and history, one to be cherished, admired and appreciated.

In the mid 1970s, Michael Jackson was working for Quarto Publishing, an innovative packaging company that pioneered the concept of third parties producing books to be released by other publishers. He was one of the founders of the company and the first book he wrote for it was called *The English Pub*. Subtitled *A Unique Social Phenomenon*, it was an exploration and exultation of that most treasured institution.

Michael's close friend and assistant Owen Barstow relates that the genesis of the book lay in Michael's successful years as a newspaper and magazine journalist, a career fuelled by long liquid lunches. Michael often recalled how he

and his colleagues would drink gallons of beer and talk about beer and pub culture but, whenever they approached their editor with a beer story, he'd turn them down in favour of another story about wine. *The English Pub* was born out of such frustrations.

It was his next book, however, that really turned heads. *The World Guide to Beer* was not the first book about beer, by any means, but it was truly different. It was not just more comprehensive and adventurous, it had a completely different approach, one that immediately endeared itself to readers.

As an example of what had gone before, in 1976 *Guardian* columnist Richard Boston penned an influential work called *Beer and Skittles*. It was an affectionate ramble through British drinking culture - the history, the ways of brewing, the types of beer and, extensively, the role of the pub in British society. It was warmly received, and inspired many a reader to seek out a quality pint, but a key point was that it was purely British. Another key point was that it was an entirely text-based work. The whole point of Quarto Publishing was to produce illustrated books. Some early critics even suggested the heavy-reliance on photographs in its publications was to the detriment of the quality of the text. But, when it came to beer, the pictures in *The World Guide to Beer*, told a thousand stories, enhancing Michael's words with tempting images of foaming beer steins, inviting pubs and shapely glassware.

The large-format, hardback book ran to 256 pages, enfolded in a bottle-green dust jacket with a beer-style label front and back, declaring the scope and nature of the work: 'The Brewing Styles; The Brands; The Countries; Fully Illustrated in Colour'.

I've heard it said that the inspiration for *The World Guide to Beer* was Hugh Johnson's *World Atlas of Wine*, first published in 1971. I never discussed that with Michael, but Owen Barstow confirms that this was probably the case. The fact that Johnson's wine book provided a useful template for exposing the colour and diversity of beer around the globe also backs up the assertion. Illustration was important to Johnson's success, and so it was for Jackson. Furthermore, it was certainly Michael's aim to raise beer onto the same platform as wine, and he also appropriated much of the language of wine tasting when embarking on his journey into beer.

The text began with a section headed 'A High and Mighty Liquor', which built the pedestal onto which Michael was seeking to place his subject. It featured sections on how beer is brewed, on hops, barley and yeast, on the strength of beer, and how it is expressed, and where in the world the biggest beer drinkers live. All of this is commonly found in books about beer today but, back in 1977, it was ground-breaking stuff. Particularly important were the couple of pages devoted to beer styles, exploring the worlds of bottom and top fermentation and subdi-

viding them into constituent parts that ranged from Pilsner to Porter. Jackson's work in defining the styles that shape the brewing universe is discussed elsewhere in this journal, but let's just note that it was in *The World Guide to Beer* that he first gathered together his findings and shared them with the wider world.

The second section of the book, 'The World's Beers', formed the lion's share of the work, a wander through all the major beer countries, kicking off in Czechoslovakia (as it was then still known) and progressing through Germany, Scandinavia, Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, The British Isles and then finally an assortment of less beer-minded nations from France through Japan, ending with Africa. For the major brewing countries, subdivisions were introduced to tackle the various beer styles they had given to the world, so presenting many an uninformed reader with their first indication of what might be a bock, an abbey beer, a Russian stout or a weizen. Even today it's common to discuss beer with someone who professes to be a regular drinker and find that their knowledge is basic, to say the least. Imagine how things were more than 30 years ago, when there were no specialist beer shops and no online distributors, and pubs and supermarkets offered only the most derisory range of broadly equal, brown or yellow beers.

Therein lies the impact of *The World Guide to Beer*. Not everyone read it, of course, but those that did not only took

the gospel as preached by St Michael to heart but became disciples themselves, spreading the word about what true lager might be, how in Belgium they brew beer with fruit and how, if you ever manage to penetrate the Iron Curtain, you'll find beer treasures beyond your wildest dreams.

Bearing in mind that the role model may well have been Hugh Johnson's *World Atlas of Wine*, maps played a vital part in unveiling the glory of the world's beers. The cartography was, it must be said, rather primitive but, through its plotting of brewing towns, country by country, readers would certainly have been endowed with a certain degree of wanderlust and, perhaps, to coin a word, 'wanderthirst'. People began to follow in Michael's footsteps. Not many at first, but gradually, as travel costs have plummeted, beer tourism has taken a hold. It's easy these days to weave your way through the international beer labyrinth, but remember that it was Jackson in *The World Guide to Beer* that began to open up this maze.

The book, of course, was not simply informative: it was a great read with Michael's 'less is more' style wryly painting evocative pictures of beer and breweries around the world. For me, a chapter that makes particularly interesting reading is the one on the USA. Bearing in mind that the first acknowledged craft brewery to open was New Albion in California in 1976, the American beer landscape when Michael first surveyed the scene was totally dif-

ferent to what it is today. New Albion does not even feature on his radar. It was that small and distant. Instead, he fills the section with descriptions of national and regional breweries, contemplating the over-reliance on over-chilled light lagers - 'Ales are a persecuted minority,' he declares - but finding splashes of colour here and there, such as the two ales and the dark lager produced by the privately-owned C Schmidt and Sons brewery, still steaming in Philadelphia at the time. It's not until he arrives on the West Coast and recounts the tale of how Fritz Maytag rescued Anchor Brewing that any real glimmer of hope for interesting beer in the USA becomes apparent. Commenting on Anchor's historic Steam Beer and newer porter, as well as experiments in barley wine, the writer suggests that things might, just might, be looking up for beer lovers across the pond.

'The smallest brewery in the United States,' he says, 'has added a whole new dimension to American brewing.' What a different chapter Michael could have written in his latter years, as there is no question that the USA was the principal beneficiary of the success of *The World Guide to Beer*, as Owen Barstow explains.

The United States, being an immigrant nation, had the world's most diverse brewing culture [he says.] 'In New York alone, you had people from every state or province in Europe turning up at Ellis Island and bringing their own food culture, and particularly their brewing culture. Before Prohibition, you could find any beer

style in the world in New York. That was wiped out by Prohibition and afterwards it was pretty much a monopoly of half a dozen large-scale brewers.¹

All this was to change, however, in 1978 when President Jimmy Carter signed into law a bill making it legal for US citizens to brew for domestic consumption in their own homes. *The World Guide to Beer* arrived at just the right time to inspire and educate them.

That was the only book in the world that had all this history of beer culture [Owen adds.] The US reprints were phenomenal. Then the home brewers, in the late 1980s and 90s, went into business and created brewpubs and micros, and it was still to Michael's book they looked.²

Alan Ditky, currently President of equipment supplier Allied Beverage Tanks, Inc., first met Michael in a bar in Portland, Maine, in 1980. He knows very well the impact of Michael's inspirational book.

The World Guide to Beer, published in 1977 at the dawn of the modern era of craft brewing in the United Kingdom and the United States, was perfectly timed to introduce the notion of beer varieties to a marketplace that had come to define beer as light-bodied pale pilsner, alternated by a pint of Guinness Stout once a year on St Patrick's Day. *The World Guide to Beer* was, without exaggeration, the inspiration for the establishment of hundreds of new breweries in North America and elsewhere. In the United States the founders of such leading

craft breweries as Sierra Nevada and Samuel Adams have acknowledged that it was *The World Guide to Beer* that inspired them to take a leap of faith, and start up new businesses in an industry that had only seen independent company contraction and consolidation for generations.³

The importance of the work is echoed by America's leading home brewing expert, Charlie Papazian, now President of the Brewers Association.

I received *The World Guide to Beer* as a gift in 1978. It turned my beer world inside out. I discovered all the glory of beer cultures. Up to that time the only books about beer culture were really British how to homebrew books. But Michael's book opened up the entire world. I still think it was the most important book I ever read.⁴

Publication of *The World Guide to Beer* was licensed by Quarto to Mitchell Beazley in the UK and Prentice Hall in the USA, but, around the time of the release of the book, Michael and Quarto parted company. It wasn't an easy separation and the consequences were to impair the joy Michael might have felt at producing a book that was about to change his, and thousands of other people's, lives. As his literary agent, Frances Kelly, explains, Michael earned very little money out of *The World Guide to Beer*, despite its enormous, enduring, worldwide sales.

Because Michael wrote *The World Guide to Beer* while he was an owner of Quarto, they

published the book, taking the copyright. He didn't get royalties. He just wrote the book and they published it.⁵

The issue rankled even more when Quarto continued to re-print the book, without updating it, the latest printing often fighting for shelf space with Michael's subsequent works, such as *The Pocket Guide to Beer*. Eventually, as the book was becoming so out of date, Michael agreed to write a revised version for Quarto, for which Frances was able to negotiate a fee but still no subsequent royalties. This was published in 1988 as *The New World Guide to Beer*. Soon, however, he was to produce another, comprehensive guide to the drink for Mitchell Beazley, a book to re-define international beer writing. Published in 1993, it was called *The Beer Companion* and re-organized the world of beer around styles, also placing a stronger emphasis on pairing beer with food, long before the recent fad for beer and food matching took a hold.

Despite the financial issues that followed the publication of *The World Guide to Beer*, the book proved to be a turning point in Jackson's career, bringing international fame for his pioneering beer writing. A direct descendent of the book was Michael's own television series, *The Beer Hunter*, which was first broadcast in 1990 and introduced not only Michael but the whole world of beer to a new audience. It remains the only major TV production to look seriously at beer in an international context.

The World Guide to Beer, however, also led Michael in a completely new direction. The book's originality and importance was recognised by whisky distributor Suntory in Japan who approached British publisher Longman to say that, if they could encourage Michael to write a sister book, *The World Guide to Whisky*, they would partly finance the work. Longman agreed, Michael signed on the dotted line and the research began.

Longman was not to publish the finished book, however. Internal changes meant that the largely academic publisher now had second thoughts. The agreement was terminated and Frances Kelly took the title instead to Dorling Kindersley, who published it, to great acclaim and prolonged success, with Michael at last earning the sort of financial reward his work deserved.

It's hard to deny that *The World Guide to Beer* looks dated now. The people in the photographs seem to come from another age. Its monochrome sections appear dull when compared to the glossy beer books that are so prevalent these days. The text, of course, is eons out of date. But it is not fanciful to suggest that it is so out of date because of its own success.

The words Michael laid on the page changed the appreciation of beer around the world for ever, and dictated in no small degree how the brewing universe was to change in the years after their publication.

It is a book I still refer to for two reasons. Firstly, as a social history, a snapshot of how the world of beer used to be in another age, and secondly, for inspiration. Michael was not the first beer writer, but he was the man who took beer writing into a new dimension and his work is always enlightening.

Ironically, his opening salvo all those years ago can now perhaps be turned on its head. Not so many people these days, it seems, care about the bread they eat. Beer, on the other hand, is taken far more seriously. I think we can safely say that Michael Jackson achieved his goal.

References

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