

BOOK REVIEW

Alehouses and Good Fellowship in Early Modern England

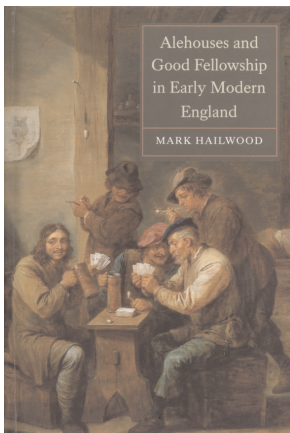
By Hailwood, M.

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As the title of Mark Hailwood's book states, this is a study of two interconnected phenomena over a 150 year period, from 1550 to 1700; the alehouse and good fellowship. The former has, of course, already received some attention, most notably Peter Clark's *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200-1830*. It was the most rudimentary of licensed drinking establishments, composed of, on average, five rooms which contained a minimal amount of furniture and decoration. Their numbers saw a dramatic increase in the era covered by this book and they were frequented by, as Hailwood shows, men and women from both the lower and, to an extent, middling orders. The growth of the alehouse brought with it an increased concern by the authorities, not only regarding the competence of the management, but also



over their very purpose. The author points out that an important shift in attitudes occurred around 1600, at both national and local levels, attitudes reflected in new legislation. While it was still

accepted that the main functions of the alehouse should remain unaltered - to serve and lodge travellers and provide essential victuals for the local poor - it was now explicitly stated that recreational drinking was not to be permitted. As circumscribed in an Act of Parliament of 1604

The ancient true and principal of inns, ale-houses and victualling houses was for the receipt, relief and lodging of wayfaring people travelling from place to place, and for such supply of the wants of such people as are not able by greater quantity to make their provision of victuals, and not meant for entertainment and harbouring of lewd and idle people to spend and consume their money and their time in lewd and drunken manner. Quote from p.25 - 1 James I c. 9.

Much of the book is taken up with an exploration of the tension between these legitimate and illicit functions of the alehouse; the contemporary realisation that they both served a necessary purpose, but could also act to undermine local communities if certain forms of nonessential drinking was allowed.

Part One - 'The alehouse in the Community' - consists of two chapters which assess the development of legislation and regulatory frameworks in Early Modern England used to control the alehouse and the extent to which they were effective. What emerges is a complex picture where the role of this institution emerges from a continuous negotiation between it and authority, an ambivalent relationship built on enforcement and resistance. It is Hailwood's contention that 'this ambivalence had much to do with the role the alehouse played in facilitating recreational drinking' p.13

And it is a phenomena associated with one specific form of recreational drinking that Part Two - 'The Community in the Alehouse' - is concerned with, good

fellowship. To investigate the nature of good fellowship the author analyses a number of literary sources including broadside ballads, legal depositions and diaries. He readily admits that reliance on such material, especially the latter, can be viewed as

Hardly propitious for revealing 'everyday' or 'routine' drinking practices. Behaviour recorded in legal records is usually taken to represent transgressive or exceptional activity, and it is undoubtedly the case that the vast majority of the incalculable instances of everyday alehouse sociability that took place left no imprint on the historical record. The 'dark figure' of unrecorded instances of good fellowship is immense ...' p.173

However, by assessing and integrating such diverse sources a very interesting and convincing picture of good fellowship emerges. As he describes it:

Bouts of good fellowship were conducted between men and women who had more often than not entered the alehouse together, or been invited to meet each other there. Alehouse-goers did not go to the alehouse in search of company: companies went in search of alehouses. This reinforces the point that the appeal of alehouse-going for many contemporaries was more about sociability than it was about the individual pursuit of narcotic oblivion, but perhaps more significantly it also reiterates the point that people tended to choose as drinking companions those to whom they were already connected through ties of kin, marriage, work, worship, neighbourhood, and even politics. Good fellowship did not serve as an escape from such bonds, it served to reinforce them'. p.216

But there was also a flip side to this form of social cohesion in that it

Often found expression in conflict with 'outsiders', and alehouse sociability could prove divisive within certain manifestations of community at the same time as bolstering other manifestations.' p.218

A question that does arise and which appears to be neglected is the historical nature of good fellowship. Hailwood does provide evidence that it became more politicised over time, especially during various succession crises, but one is left wondering how it first evolved, if it changed and how and why it dissipated.

That said, *Alehouses and Good Fellowship in Early Modern England* provides us with an insightful exploration of a specific form of drinking establishment and a particular mode of behaviour intimately connected with it. It is symptomatic of a relatively new approach to alcohol studies, a 'cultural history of drinking', which began to emerge at around the beginning of this century. What appears to unify this method is a more nuanced attitude to the role drinking plays within cultures. While certainly not denying the physiological effects of alcohol, the importance of context and learned behaviours is also given due consideration. Thus, recreational drinking needs to be analysed as meaningful social interaction open to change through time and space. Furthermore, as it is not an isolated feature of experience, it can offer a means to assess other related socio-cultural phenomena. It is precisely this that Mark Hailwood does so well while simultaneously providing a book that is a pleasure to read.

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