

BOOK REVIEW

A History of Brussels Beer in 50 Objects

Walsh, E.

Brussels: Brussels Beer City

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The idea of using objects to tell stories about the past is, of course, exactly what museums have done for centuries. The idea of pulling together these stories into a linked narrative started with a programme on BBC Radio 4 in 2010 telling ‘A History of the World in 100 Objects’, beginning with a stone axe two million of so years old and ending with a credit card and a solar-powered lamp. This soon became a best-selling book, written by Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum. Since then a number of other ‘History of X in Y objects’ have appeared on subjects as diverse as Mozart, Bauhaus, fashion and Coventry. Now the Brussels-based Irish beer writer Eoghan Walsh has used the concept to give us the story of brewing in his adopted home, one of the world’s great beer cities.

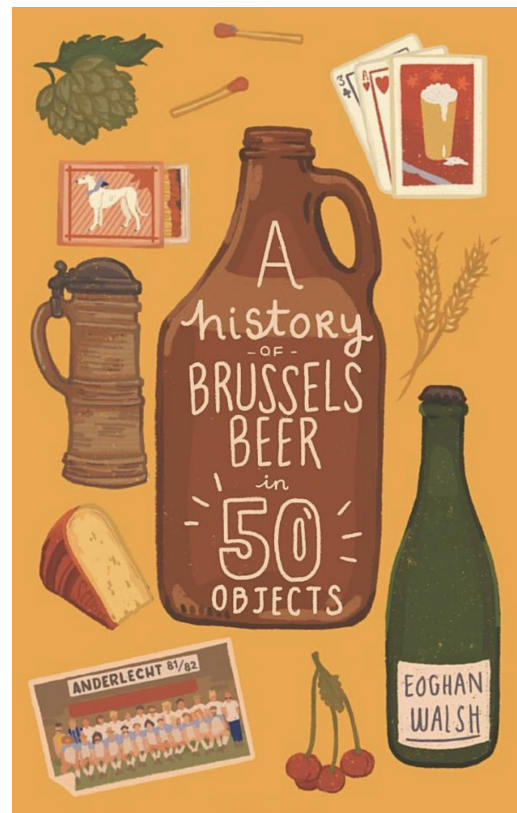
To pull off this concept properly requires deep knowledge, wide knowledge, a love of the subject and an ability to write both concisely – Walsh has limited himself to 500 words per essay – and in a way that holds the interest of the reader, pulling in unexpected and entertaining facts, making oblique connections, telling readers facts they did not know, but which widen their appreciation of the topic.

Walsh does all that is required of him, and the result is a deeply informed, entertaining and educational history of beer in Brussels using everything from a statue of St. Arnouldus, patron saint of brewers, to a picture of the Anderlecht football team, from the coolship at the Cantillon brewery to a block of cheese, from the Senne river to a *tire-bouchon*, the ‘cork-puller’ used to open bottles of lambic and geuze, to illustrate aspects of the city’s long and important association with the making and drinking of beer.

Each object is treated as something to riff off, to tackle wider aspects of Brussels beer history. Peter Breughel’s painting

The Harvesters, created in Brussels in 1565, is used to prime a discussion of how lambic, the great native beer of the Brussels area, is not, in fact, as old as many books on beer claim, being first mentioned only in 1794. A bottle of Geuze Belle-Vue is the illustration for the story of the hot summer of 1949, when temperatures in Brussels rose so high that three million bottles of beer exploded in the cellars of the city’s lambic brewers, and only those at the Brasserie Belle-Vue survived mostly intact, because Belle-Vue filtered and pasteurised its beers.

Fifty objects times 500 words is, you will have worked out, 250,000 words: since the average novel is only 80,000 words, that is a lot of book. Fortunately for the readers, this



is a volume for dipping into, reading one little chapter at a time, and coming back later for more.

Read it if you're thinking of visiting Brussels, read it if you've been to Brussels and want to learn more about what you saw and experienced, read it if you'll never go anywhere near the city but would like a series of fascinating vignettes of Brussels life down the centuries, all connected, as so much is in Brussels, with beer.

MARTYN CORNELL