

BOOK REVIEW

Globalization in a Glass: The Rise of Pilsner Beer through Technology, Taste and Empire

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In *Globalization in a Glass: The Rise of Pilsner Beer through Technology, Taste and Empire* Malcolm Purinton sets out to explain how one particular type of beer, Pilsner, became the dominant style across the globe. Its ubiquity remains undiminished despite the rise of craft beer over the last three to four decades. In fact, many craft brewers are now producing their own pilsners and some make nothing else. To explain its rise to dominance the author takes a very broad view, tackling the subject from a number of angles and he is particularly interested in how it came to replace British beers, even in the British empire. He argues that a

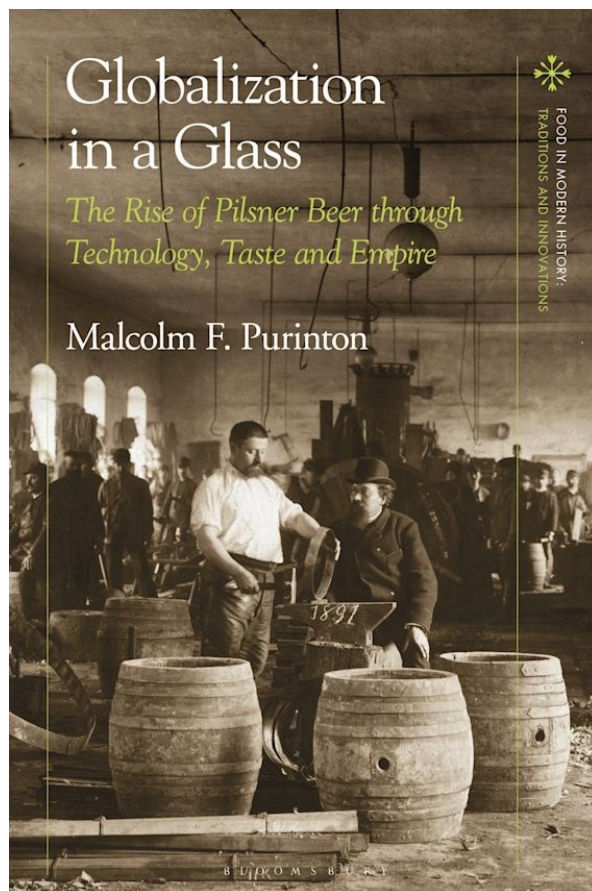
unique combination of elements that were exploited successfully by Continental pilsner brewers to develop a consistent, high-quality product that reflected the changing tastes of beer consumers for light-colored, low alcohol, highly carbonated beer. These include the development of new technologies for the brewing industry, decisions to use scientific methods in beer production, and business strategies regarding management and investment capital accumulation. [p.3]

Scientific and technological advances in the latter part of the nineteenth century are viewed as particularly important, especially the adoption of artificial refrigeration in both the production and transportation of pilsner. The author argues that brewers beyond the British Isles were far more keen to embrace new methods and equipment, portraying British brewers as complacent and tied to tradition. The result of such innovations was a consistent product;

[t]he best beer in the nineteenth century, and up to the present, is a consistent beer. Consistency is king. Consumers, once they find a product they like, do not want to change, they want to receive what they expect. In the pilsner beers produced by Continental brewers,

they found a beer that they could depend upon and trust through the use of scientific processes and the adoption of the latest technology. By consciously ignoring the technological, Pasteurian, and Pure Yeast revolutions in brewing the British brewing industry fell far behind the Continental brewers when it came to gaining new consumers as the nineteenth century moved toward its end. [p.72]

The incorporation of new science and technology, however, was expensive and it was only through the formation of limited liability companies that enough capital could be realised. British brewers also went down this road, but they used the money to consolidate their home tied estates.



The success of pilsner within the British empire is also examined where it came to replace beer styles of the homeland. Purinton states that

[w]hat we see is that in the British colonies, while many Britons went to great lengths to retain a high level of “Britishness” through the purchase of imperial commodities such as cotton and foodstuffs, they did not do so in their choice of beer. The break between British settlers and their country of origin regarding beer consumption is a unique element of the British colonial experience. [pp.123-4]

Another thread examined by the author is the German diaspora of the 1830s and ‘40s which saw large numbers migrating and settling on both north and south America. Not surprisingly they took their pilsner brewing and consumption with them. Some of these migrants would go on to found substantial brewing empires, for example the Busch, Schlitz, Coors and Pabst families.

After describing how pilsner became such a dominant drink the book ends by trying to explain why it did so. For the author

the physical attributes of pilsner – its color, clarity, alcoholic strength, and level of carbonation – combined with a perceived status as the beer of modernity elevated this style above the other beer choices, especially British ales. [p.139]

This is a well researched book which makes excellent use of primary source, especially brewing journals of the period. Two other works on the subject have been published within the last five years, Mark Dredge’s *A Brief History of Lager* and Tom Acitelli’s *Pilsner: How the Beer of Kings Changed the World*, but, rather oddly, neither are referenced. Another issue is the lack of statistics. For example, it is stated that

[b]y the end of the nineteenth century the golden pilsner lager beer produced by German and other Continental brewing industries had overtaken ales produced by the British in just about every beer market in the world outside the British Isles. [p.73]

However, despite this no doubt being true, no figures are produced to back up this assertion. That said, this is an extremely readable and thought provoking attempt to explain the rise and continued success of pilsner.

TIM HOLT