

BOOK REVIEW

**The Mystique of Running the Public House in England:
Quest for El Dorado, 1840-1939**

Gutzke, D.W.

London: Routledge

2024, Pp.270, £145.00

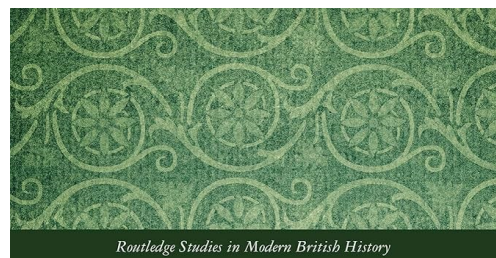
ISBN: 978 1 032-58980-0

Since the publication of his *Protecting the Pub* in 1989 David Gutzke has become probably the most important academic author whose focus has been the English public house, something that is even more impressive as he is an American based in the Midwest for several decades. Since the late 1980s he has produced works on subjects ranging from how brewers and publicans responded to the temperance movement to the influence of Progressive movement on pub design and from the rise and fall of the roadhouse (co-authored with Michael Law) to women drinking in pubs – the latter being particularly impressive.

His latest book – *The Mystique of Running the Public House in England: Quest for El Dorado, 1840-1939* – is ambitious in its scope; it explores what the author states is a ‘neglected topic, wholesaler and retailer relations in the brewing industry from 1840 to 1939’ (p.1). This is an area Gutzke had proposed, but abandoned soon after completing his PhD. However, he thinks that the intervening years were beneficial as two factors emerged which he views as vitally important, ones overlooked by previous researchers. The first of these is what he calls the myth of El Dorado, that is running a pub was perceived to be akin to ‘a nirvana which promised unimaginable wealth, social status, respect and social mobility for those limited in income but not in ambition’ (p.1). The second factor is simply the excessive number of licensed properties. Of particular use in uncovering their importance are two primary sources which Gutzke believes have not been drawn on before; brewers’ interviews of prospective landlords and the probate wills of publicans.

The book begins by describing the apparent appeal of running a pub. References are made to it in fiction (Gutzke often cites John Hampson’s *Saturday Night at the Grey-*

hound) as well as magistrates’ reports and testimonies before parliamentary select committees. Its attraction was also perpetuated by public house agents and many brewers to entice the inexperienced and gullible. There then follows an analysis of how realistic it was for public house managers and beerhouse owners to progress and become a tenant. It turns out that the possibility of such a move was slim, a stigma being held against such candidates by magistrates and brewers – both viewing them as of generally questionable character and financially poor. Using personal interviews held by brewers Gutzke proposes that desirable tenants were seen as of good social standing and, if they lacked experience, to be married to an upright wife helped. The author goes on to use over 200 obituaries published in *Licensing World* to discover the social origins of successful candidates. It transpires that two in five were ‘inheritors, typically eldest sons prepared for succession over decades by publican fathers’ (p.72); 10% were former professional athletes and



**THE MYSTIQUE OF RUNNING
THE PUBLIC HOUSE
IN ENGLAND**

QUEST FOR EL DORADO, 1840–1939

David W. Gutzke



another 10% had 'Trade' connections. The success of the remaining 40% depended upon 'questions about family origins, previous careers and other qualifications as potential retailers – available capital, marital status, numbers of live-in children, the landlady's catering experience and contacts with others connected with the trade' (p.76). That they lacked little or no experience did not appear to worry the brewers, a point emphasised by the absence of any training or apprenticeships.

Throughout the period covered by this book beer retailing became increasingly more difficult, yet the myth of El Dorado continued. This is exemplified by a quote from the editor of the *Brewers' Journal*: 'Injustices exist merely in the imagination of the discontented few or in those who ... find it to their advantage to ... stir up strife between the retail and wholesale sections of the Trade' (p.117). Contrary views never saw the light of day as the general press refused to publish them. The Depression of the 1930s made matters worse. Statistics collected by H. Weber Brown (chairman of the Brewers' Society) highlighted that two in five licensees

were in such difficulty as to force brewers to intervene for them to survive. Other so called 'Progressive' brewers intervened in a different way. They visualised publicans 'in a broader context: he became part of an equal partnership in which he and his wife worked together in reconfiguring a new image of the post-war pub. What arose from the war was the heightened importance of food as an antidote to drunkenness, a new partnership for both publican and wife as caterers, and Progressive brewers' commitment to elevating the status of licensed victualling as a life-long occupation' (p.171). Thus, these new 'gentleman publicans' fitted neatly into the myth of El Dorado even though they made up an extremely small proportion of the sector.

The impression one is left with after reading this excellent book is at best a sense of disquiet at the behaviour of brewers towards those that sold their beer – their paternalism can be perceived as mercenary. The dream of El Dorado was, in the end, a nightmare for most. Yet this myth continues ...

TIM HOLT