

Zitierhinweis

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The period 1550–1700 saw the ‘golden age’ of the English alehouse. Although ale had long been consumed as part of a daily diet in England, it had mostly been produced on a domestic scale, and its retail had tended to be sporadic and temporary. In the 16th century, brewing came to be transformed from a domestic activity to a larger commercial trade, and between 1550 and 1700 the number of alehouses in England rose, as did the ratio of alehouses to people. Alehouses become unrivalled places for recreational drinking, sociability, and ‘good fellowship’. But the growing popularity of alehouses prompted mounting concerns, hostility, and attempts at regulation by the state. Concerns about disorderly behaviour loomed large, and many early modern governors feared that alehouses not only promoted drunkenness and intoxication, but also fostered political subversion and sedition among the ‘lower sort’. Thus at the same time as alehouses enjoyed new heights of popularity among ordinary people, they were simultaneously identified by the state as a prime target for regulation and suppression. This is the setting for Mark Hailwood’s new book, which provides a study of the early modern alehouse during its peak period of popularity and controversy. He suggests that the primary attraction of the alehouse for early modern people was the opportunity it offered them for engaging in company, sociability, and ‘good fellowship’; and that these attractions outweighed the other associated functions of alehouses, such as intoxication or the potential for subversive political agitation. Seen on these terms, the ‘battle’ over the English alehouse in the 17th century was characterised not only by concerns about drinking and intoxication, or even by the government’s suspicion of alehouses as subversive institutions; rather, it was characterised by the state seeking to micromanage the leisure activities of ordinary men and women, and the attempts by ordinary men and women to resist or negotiate the interference of the state in their local communities.

These ordinary men and women, the patrons of the early modern alehouse, are the heroes of Hailwood’s book. Examining case studies from rural villages and hamlets across England, Hailwood focuses on the people who drank in alehouses, asking how they interacted and socialised, what bonds they formed and how these were sustained, what meanings they ascribed to drinking rituals and practices, and how they responded to governors who sought to regulate their activities. In so doing, he argues that the alehouse may be used as a prism through which to view and understand the relationships, communities, and identities of ordinary people, and in so doing to examine their responses to wider political, social, and cultural processes and change in early modern England.

The book is divided into two sections, each with two chapters. The first chapter explores the role of alehouse in the early modern community. The traditional function of alehouses was that they offered lodgings for travellers and provided victuals for the poor. In this sense, alehouses were seen to be vital institutions that catered for the material and physical needs of community members and visitors. This function of alehouses was largely sanctioned and accepted by early modern governors, and Hailwood shows that alehouse keepers and their supporters were able to draw on this tradition of legitimacy by emphasising their provision of these ‘essential’ services when petitioning for a license.

Following Beat Kümin, Hailwood notes that alehouses had a second core function in the early modern period: they provided an important place for recreation, and they facilitated social interaction.⁽¹⁾ It was this second function of alehouses, he argues, that proved most controversial, and provided the grounds for challenge by early modern governors. It was the potential for alehouse *sociability*, rather than the alehouse in itself, that was targeted as illegitimate. Recognising this fact, alehouse supporters did not attempt to justify these recreational functions in their dealings with the authorities, preferring instead to defend alehouses’ traditional, accepted functions. But in practice, good fellowship, sociability, and recreational drinking were a vital feature of the early modern alehouse, and it was these functions that most defined its role in the community.

The second chapter begins with a discussion of ‘alebench politics’. Hailwood tackles the common view that alehouses were ‘disorderly’ institutions that fostered a popular politics

characterised by sedition, subversion, and irreligion. He considers evidence that some alehouse patrons did speak out against the church or state, and shows that mocking rituals, threatening images, and anonymous libels did circulate in alehouses. However, he cautions that these examples are not the whole story, and makes the case that 'the political culture of the alehouse was not characterised by a homogenous anti-authoritarianism. Its patrons took up a range of positions ... The result was a heterogeneous and fractured political culture' (70–1).

Having shown that alehouse patrons did not all rail against authority indiscriminately, but expressed a range of different political positions, the next section looks at how alehouse keepers and patrons engaged in more 'subtle' negotiations with authority on an everyday level. This is most clear in relation to the (attempted) enforcement of alehouse regulation, and the responses that this provoked on the ground, with many examples of alehouse keepers and patrons defending their institutions and defying attempts to suppress them. However, Hailwood is careful not to draw too distinct a line between the 'authorities' and the alehouse crowd in these cases: he shows that local governors and officeholders were often alehouse patrons themselves, and that this often complicated or impeded the enforcement of state regulation. In this way, the regulation of alehouses reflected wider processes of governance and state formation in early modern England.

The third chapter explores the idiom of 'good fellowship' in alehouse culture. Hailwood argues that people did not patronise alehouses simply to become intoxicated, but rather to 'participate in a series of meaningful social rituals' that included drinking alcohol (p. 117). The chapter is based on representations of drinking and alehouse culture in popular print, particularly drinking ballads. These ballads are divided into two main categories: first, warnings against excessive drinking; and second, celebrations of social drinking, stressing the positive aspects of good fellowship. Drawing on a wide selection of these ballads, Hailwood describes some of the basic 'demands, rules and expectations' that surrounded recreational drinking in this period. These included financial obligations, such as the importance of paying for your share of the 'pot' at the end of the night; and physical obligations, such as the expectation that you would be able to keep up with and match the drinking capacity of your companions, and the expectation that you would be able to keep control of your mental and physical capacities even after a session of heavy drinking. This illustrates that drinking rituals were inscribed with a complex range of social and cultural meanings.

The chapter finishes with a discussion of gender, questioning whether the alehouse may have offered 'counter-codes of manhood' for poor men, young men, and other non-householders, and also whether it also provided a place for women to challenge traditional gender norms through their participation in recreational drinking. However, although Hailwood surveys many different representations of male and female drinking practices, he is reluctant to draw any strong conclusions. He suggests that although alehouse sociability may sometimes have undermined patriarchal norms, for some people, it did not always do so; and he notes that gender representations in drinking ballads were ambivalent, and not always clearly positive or negative. The evidence therefore suggests a complex set of relationships between drinking and gender identities; and Hailwood's analysis serves to highlight these complexities, rather than argue for one overarching interpretation.

Moving on from ballads and popular print, the fourth chapter turns to legal records, diaries, and depositions as evidence for what kinds of social bonds were formed or reinforced through drinking practices and rituals. This enables Hailwood to compare the *practice* of good fellowship, as gleaned from court records and other first-hand accounts, with the depictions in drinking ballads described in the previous chapter. On the whole, the two seem to be largely in agreement. There is evidence that heavy drinking was celebrated through participation in drinking contests and games. Keeping control of your faculties was also important, with a distinction made between heavy drinking and over-indulging. Those who lost their mental and physical faculties were mocked and criticised. The 'politics of payment'

was also important in practice, with drinkers expected to contribute their fair share of the bill – this suggests that recreational drinking may have been a form of ‘conspicuous consumption’ for some people, with participation in these rituals seen as a confirmation of social status as well as a demonstration of ‘wit’ and stamina. Hailwood also identifies other key components of alehouse sociability, including song and music, the use of ceremonial drinking vessels and health-drinking, and competitive games such as cards, dice, bowling, ‘tables’, and shove groat.

All of these activities and practices were present in the early modern alehouse, but they would not necessarily have involved everyone all at once. In fact, Hailwood shows that the sociability in alehouses was not so much communal as it was compartmentalised, illustrated by the common practice of drinking in ‘companies’. Not everyone in the alehouse drank together, and Hailwood states that ‘it is more significant ... to ask not who drank in alehouses, but rather who drank in alehouses *with whom*’ (p. 181). Drinking companies were usually fairly small, consisting of between two and four people. They tended to be composed of relative peers – that is, people of similar socio-economic status, and in many cases these groups were built upon pre-existing occupational or kinship ties. This suggests that drinking companies were formed *outside* the alehouse, rather than within it; your drinking companions would be people that you already knew, rather than strangers you had met on the alebench.

In the final section of the chapter, Hailwood asks whether good fellowship contributed to meaningful social bonds that existed beyond the alehouse, or whether it was an ‘opportunity to briefly escape from the bonds and obligations of wider society’ (p. 216). Although some historians had previously assumed the latter, Hailwood argues that it was the former.

Alehouse sociability was ‘generally founded upon *pre-existing* ties’ (p. 218), and people would arrange to visit alehouses in order to spend time with their companions, either as part of their quotidian routine, or making a special trip outside their immediate locale. Thus alehouse sociability was not an escape from existing bonds and relationships, but an opportunity to reinforce them. This fits with Hailwood’s central thesis that alehouses were one of the most important institutions in early modern society. Whereas in the pre-Reformation period, church ales and other holidays had allowed whole villages to participate in drinking and sociability together, the period 1550–1700 saw a ‘rather more fragmented drinking culture that both reflected and reinforced more narrowly based forms of community’ (p. 221). Hailwood’s suggestion, that the alehouse might be a prism through which to view and understand these wider social changes, is an important contribution to the existing historiography of early modern England.

One of the main strengths of this book is the wide range of source material and local case studies that have been brought to bear on the discussion. Court depositions, diaries, and popular print all serve to recapture the perspectives and practices of ‘ordinary people’, and locate these within a wider culture of sociability and community. The treatment of the relationship between governors and governed is carefully nuanced, and the number of case studies presented in the main text and footnotes means that the dynamics of regulation can be explored at a local level rather than relying on a sharp distinction between ‘rulers’ and ‘ruled’. This is in keeping with Hailwood’s main thesis, which seeks to avoid any simplistic statements about the alehouse ‘crowd’ and their politics, showing instead that alehouse patrons were a mixed, heterogeneous group, with divergent opinions, allegiances, and personalities.

In some places, however, the large number of case studies and counter-examples offered one after the other can result in a loss of direction. This is especially noticeable in the sections on gender, where Hailwood gives examples of almost every possible scenario of women drinking in alehouses, and various interpretations of female drinking, both positive and negative. While this serves to locate women firmly *in* the early modern alehouse, and complicates our picture of alehouse patrons and the relationships between them, this comes at the expense of any stronger argument or conclusion. Although ‘female involvement in

alehouse sociability was a common theme', Hailwood sums up, 'its implications were ambivalent' (p. 167). This ambivalence is apparent in several sections of the book, when the mass of sometimes contradictory source material seems to resist any one interpretation or overall pattern. In these instances, perhaps the discussion could have been trimmed down to allow for a more rigorous analysis of what these examples mean in a wider social or community context: this would have allowed for more of a connection to be drawn between the alehouse and the world outside its walls.

This kind of equivocation is, however, perhaps unavoidable given Hailwood's extensive bibliography of primary sources drawn from many different localities across the country. And it would be unfair to criticise this diversity, especially given that the capaciousness of alehouse sociability is one of the central aims of the book. Hailwood pays attention to each of the viewpoints expressed in his source material, and never assumes that the relationships and practices of the alehouse that he describes for any particular case were homogeneous. In so doing, he furthers his aim of bringing the lives of ordinary men and women into sharper relief: by showing that alehouse patrons were a heterogeneous group, with no two drinking companies or configurations exactly alike, he avoids making any simplistic statements about the shape and character of 'popular culture' in early modern England. Similarly, by focusing on examples from a number of villages, hamlets, and small rural communities, Hailwood is sensitive to the various attitudes and perceptions that can be found in different places, and the range of responses to alehouse culture that existed across the country. If this leads sometimes to ambivalent or cautious conclusions, this is more than compensated for by the richness of the material, and Hailwood's even-handed treatment of it. Overall, this book makes a very strong case for the alehouse as one of the key institutions in early modern society, and will make a valuable addition for students of popular culture in early modern England.

Notes

1. Beat Kümin, *Drinking Matters: Public Houses and Social Exchange in Early Modern Central Europe* (Basingstoke, 2007).

Author's Note

The author would like to thank Dr Bishop for taking the time to review his book, and in particular for providing an eloquent and effective summary of its structure and arguments. The author finds it to be a judicious review and is happy to accept it without further comment.