

## ***A Review of Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason***

**By**

**David W. Gutzke  
Missouri State University**

Book: *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason*

Author: Jessica Warner

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Year: 2002

In her first monograph, Jessica Warner, a research scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (University of Toronto), argues that an understanding of concerns about rising gin consumption in early 18th century England will elucidate the factors of drug usage in the United States during the 1990s. She believes that insights into "why some people worry at some times and not at others" will enable observers to anticipate the occasion of a future drug scare in America. The focus here, then, is really on perceptions of drinking habits in the quite distant past as a mirror for understanding a similar abuse of another "drug" in contemporary America. The fact that gin consumption was legal in Georgian England does not concern Warner as she draws a parallel between it and illegal drug use in the United States more than two centuries later.

The study's present-mindedness shapes her approach to what she dubs the gin craze, the years between 1720 and 1751 when per capita gin consumption soared from .6 gallons (1720) to an apex of 2.2 gallons (1743) before plummeting to the original level late in the 1750s. Because she is primarily interested in describing the anxiety created over spiraling gin consumption, her explanations about motivation tend to be rather predictable variables: (a) changes in production and (b) pricing and supply (notably the "new consumerism"). There is nothing here about Peter Clark's (1988) subtle thesis in which he argued that critics adroitly utilized propaganda to exaggerate the distinctiveness of the spirit trade and the evils of mother gin. According to Clark, pressure for legislation came from a section of the landed classes. That Warner is unable to endorse this thesis has much to do with her chief source of funding: the National Institutes of Health in the United States. By accepting financial support from a Government agency concerned with studying topics related to health problems, Warner began researching with one important preconception: that gin consumption was a genuine social problem, certainly not the product of agitation manufactured by Britain's governing classes.

Nevertheless, the book has unquestionable merits. It explores with considerable effect the importance of women both as sellers and buyers of Geneva (the English version of Gin that had been pioneered by the Dutch), the role of informers, and the reasons why legal suppression repeatedly failed. In fact, some of the most intriguing sections concern gin retailers arrested for violating the law, over whose fate the popular mob and informers vehemently debated and sometimes clashed. Some of this material is not entirely new, having appeared in several of her articles over the course of the last decade. Additionally, *Craze* draws on much unpublished material that is cited in endnotes and it contains neither a bibliography nor a detailed index. However, there is a brief commentary on historical sources.

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In drawing on the early eighteenth century to explain the early twenty-first century, Warner uses anachronistic terms and misleading contrasts. Though she repeatedly speaks of "public houses," this term did not enter the vernacular until much later after the turn of the eighteenth century. Inns, taverns and alehouses were the classifications of drinking premises during the gin craze. Still more surprisingly, she writes of the governing classes wanting laborers to "stay off the dole" (p. 44), a phrase which had no such meaning until the 1930s when Britain's National Government addressed unemployment. At the more serious interpretative level, she wrongly believes that late-Victorian temperance organizations espoused other social reforms such as women's suffrage and trade unionism. Unlike those in the U.S., British temperance organizations made little headway in linking drink reforms such as prohibition with the female suffrage question until well after the turn of the century, and even then only the British Women's Temperance Association embraced this stance. Warner also draws a false distinction between late nineteenth century temperance reformers, who she describes as espousing abstention from all alcohol and Georgian moral reformers, whose prime goal was the reformation of working-class morals. Late-Victorian prohibitionists did, in fact, campaign for the local veto, which antagonized working-class drinkers precisely because it proposed to shut laborers' pubs and beerhouses while leaving untouched the propertied classes' drinking establishments--private clubs, restaurants, hotels, and domestic cellars.

This book, like Patrick Dillon's *Gin: The Much-Lamented Death of Madam Geneva* (2002), offers the general reader a useful introduction to the topic. Her extended subtitle--"a Tragicomedy in three acts in which High and Low are brought together, much to their Mutual Discomfort. Complete with Stories, some witty and some not, conducive to mediation on Recent Events"--as well as her chapter titles underline her attempt to appeal to a popular audience. However, no effort was made to place the topic in a broader historiographic context, and so *Craze* is an unlikely choice as a supplemental textbook in college courses. For specialists, this study does not go far enough in offering a convincing, subtle explanation of the source, nature and decline of the gin mania.

#### ENDNOTE

Correspondence concerning this review should be sent electronically to David W. Gutzke at Missouri State University at [dwg478f@smsu.edu](mailto:dwg478f@smsu.edu)

#### REFERENCES

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