Welcome to the Taproom

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The Taproom

“Everyone’s Favorite Topic: Beer and the Rest of the World”

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When I started doing research in beer history, I had no idea what I was getting into.

I doubt there is a beer pun in the world I haven’t heard yet. People have wished me hoppy holidays. They can barley contain their excitement about interesting beer articles they have just read. They collapse in fits of laughter when talking about the first *draft* of my project.

I have gotten used to people treating my research as something of a joke, a topic growing out of a personal fondness for the malt beverage. Mostly I play along: When I go to a pub, I’m conducting empirical research. When my pint arrives, I sniff and swirl the glass as if it were Château Lafite and pontificate about strong hoppy-citrus flavors and dark malts with just a touch of smoke. (My friend Malcolm can actually do this—wait until you read his contribution to this blog!)

There seems to be something captivating about beer. When I was doing research on postwar retribution against war criminals in Czechoslovakia, my friends and colleagues nodded solemnly and then forgot all about it 10 seconds later. The minute I started working on beer, my research became everyone’s favorite topic. Perhaps people can relate more to pilsner than to prosecuting collaborators; and Cascade hops may hold more charm than crimes against national honor.

There are numerous advantages to being a beer historian, obviously. I can explain why American lagers taste the way they do—not great. The Bavarian *Reinheitsgebot* has lost its mythic status. I can discuss the difference between top-fermented and bottom-fermented beers in three languages. And, since I have become a beer scholar, no one has dared to take me to a restaurant with a less-than-excellent beer selection.

But more than that: since I started doing research in beer history, I have come to realize that it is a story that spans the world.

It starts when human history starts. There is research suggesting that humans started brewing beer before they started making bread. Beer has been a constant feature of our lives: from the Ancient Sumerians and Egyptians sipping their murky, unhopped beverage through a straw to the newest hyperlocal craft beer brewery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which has just rolled out its incredibly complex sour pale ale. From homebrew made out of maize, oats, pumpkins, or molasses—and anything on hand, really, that could be made to ferment—to an industrial product that tastes the same in each of the millions of bottles that leaves the brewery. From the matron at the stove to transnational brewing giants worth billions of dollars.

Beer sailed on the Mayflower and followed European immigrants to the New World; it accompanied British colonizers to Africa and India, as well as merchants and empire builders to China and Japan. It was drunk throughout Ancient Europe and spread deep into Italy (there go your highbrow wine-drinking Romans). Recently, 5,000-year-old beer-making tool kits have been discovered in China. While there are countries where you couldn't get a coffee if your life depended on it, and while there may even be a few remote spots on Earth without cable internet, you would be hard pressed to find a place without beer.

Beer has permeated politics, society, economy, culture, technology, and pretty much every other aspect of human existence. Nationalism, xenophobia, and racial prejudice have fermented under much of its history. It has profited from knowledge transfer across state borders, and its past and present are defined by international movements of goods, capital, and people. At the height of industrialization in Germany, beer produced more revenue than the coal mining industry. Last year, 5.6 million visitors flocked to Munich's *Oktoberfest*, the largest beer festival in the world, to experience genuine Bavarian culture (and a genuine Bavarian hangover).

Beer has also changed our environments. As it has traveled around the world, picking up barley and other varieties of grain, it has transformed agricultural practices and landscapes. When its production became concentrated in a few places and the demand for local sources of grain dwindled, it impacted land use in wide areas. Before the advent of artificial refrigeration, beer required immeasurable amounts of natural ice to cool the

cellars. Industrial beer production has put a strain on groundwater sources, triggering conflicts between brewers and local populations.

In amongst this deluge of issues, it is easy to forget that beer is also a drink. It has a taste, it contains nutrients, it makes you drunk. It connects the realms of politics, economy, and culture to the material world of things. When we raise a glass, all the environmental, technological, and economic aspects involved in making beer go bubbling right through our bodies.

Diverse, ever changing, innovative, multifaceted, and, frankly, intoxicating, beer history research has all the qualities of the beverage it studies. Just like a microbrewery proudly presenting its IPAs, APAs, and Reds, its Sours and Stouts, this blog's mission is to show off the complexity, the extent, and the excitement of beer history. Like a taproom, it is meant to be a place for sharing ideas, information, opinions, and, really, just stories about beer.

Enjoy. And read responsibly.