Empire in a Bottle: Tales of a Beer Historian

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The Taproom

The Taproom is a monthly series that explores the rich history of all things beer. It is curated by **Pavla Šimková**.

By **Malcolm F. Purinton**

"Why don't you write your literature review about alcohol?" my African colonialism professor asked me during my master's degree. "I can do that?!" I replied. The possibility of researching and writing on the history of beer and alcohol was, honestly, mind-blowing. I had already been an avid homebrewer for many years and had just begun to write articles for a regional beer magazine on historical topics. That first academic piece of writing ended up being a literature review about British alcohol policies. This was 10 years ago and nine years before I completed my doctoral dissertation focusing on the world history of Pilsner: "Empire in a Bottle: Commodities, Culture, and the Consumption of Pilsner Beer in the British Empire, c. 1870–1914." It has been a lot of hard work and fun since that fateful question.

It always gets a laugh but I do, in fact, do research in the archives and at the bar. My research and conferences have led me from Boston to Seattle, Belmopan to London, Dublin to Munich, and Oxford to Cape Town. I don't just hide out in archives and libraries researching the development of breweries and beer styles of the past; I also reach out to, interview, and get to know the local brewers and beer writers wherever I am traveling. This has allowed me to enjoy and record how the "craft beer revolution" that originated in the United States has spread across the world. During my week in the **Guinness Archives** in Dublin, I naturally made sure to have a pint or two of fresh Guinness at the Storehouse after the archive closed, but then explored the newer "craft" bars around the city including Against the Grain and the Brew Dock. Through a college friend I met a local beer journalist, Richard Lubell, and was able to enjoy pints and conversation with the recent

founders of Stone Barrel Brewing, Niall Fitzgerald and Kevin McKinney. This was in 2014 when craft beer—American inspired—had really begun to take off in Ireland.

When discussing the origin of craft beer in the United States, people usually point to the purchase and revamping of Anchor Brewing in San Francisco in the late 1960s, when Fritz Maytag III bought the brewery as it was about to go out of business. He liked that Anchor didn't focus on the light golden lagers that dominated the bars and stores. In 1976, Jack McAuliffe opened the first new craft beer microbrewery in northern California. His New Albion Brewing Co. in Sonoma only lasted until 1982 but it was the first of several new microbreweries that focused on producing European-style ales in the United States, including Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., New Belgium Brewing, and Samuel Adams.

One of the most fascinating parts of my bar and brewery research has been learning how, over the past few decades, the flavors and beer styles have changed while crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Many of the first American craft brewers—including McAuliffe and the founders of New Belgium of Colorado and Harpoon of Massachusetts—were inspired by European travels. They focused on producing European styles like Belgian abbey ales, pale ales, and porters—the beer styles they could not find in the United States in the 1980s. They wanted choices beyond the golden lagers of Pabst and Anheuser-Busch. It took time throughout the 1980s and 1990s for the knowledge and desire of "craft beer" to spread around the United States, as more beer consumers began seeking out the "new" flavors of old European beer styles.

It took another decade or so for those styles to develop their own characteristics—including highly-hopped single and double IPAs, or experimenting with ingredients like coffee or mango—and then return across the Atlantic as American creations under the moniker of "craft beer." While in the 1970s and early 1980s it took actual visits to Europe for future American brewers to learn of and appreciate the styles they would soon adopt and change, the twenty-first-century brewers were able to make use of the internet as well as travel. As the popularity of craft beer grew in the popular media, and with websites like **Ratebeer.com**—now with Anheuser-Busch InBev as a minority stakeholder—and **Beer Advocate**, beer drinkers and brewers across the world could learn of, and be a part of, the proclaimed Craft Beer Revolution.

During my experiences as a beer historian I have been witness to the migration of not only the flavors of American craft beers (with hop-forward IPAs and high alcohol imperial porters made with ingredients like vanilla and coffee), but also the attitude of the

craft beer revolution. An attitude of smaller is better, authenticity is essential, and experimentation is embraced. Compared to previous American cultural exports of “Coca-Colonization” or “McDonaldization” that represented the globalization of American culture through a flattening of flavor and lack of individuality, craft beer brewing spreads ideas of independence and the power of the underdog. The new styles and experimentation in beer flavors are also indicative of a revolution against the historical flavors developed with the spread of the Pilsner during the nineteenth century, when consistency and golden clarity were the focus for lager brewers in countries around the world. This desire for authenticity and independence as a quality of craft beer was clearly expressed by the Scottish-based BrewDog when Camden Town Brewery, founded in Camden, London in 2010 sold out to the world’s largest brewer Anheuser-Busch InBev in 2015. In response to the sale, the BrewDog bar a few blocks away made a show of removing Camden Town’s beer from its menu with a **video** on Twitter saying: No compromise.

For many of my friends and family, I’m the one they turn to when they are in a store someplace in the world trying to choose a good beer for a party or a gift for a boss. I’m also usually the person they call when they need to be walked through the process of brewing their own beer in their kitchens; the one they send news articles to about new beers or hops varietals. My thirteen years of brewing beer have helped with understanding the processes of production, while my years of archival and pub research have helped me to develop a historical and contemporary foundation of information about beer and brewing that can be fun to discuss with friends at a bar, or while leading discussions at a conference. Being the “Beer Guy” leads to lots of chuckles in conversation but, as with many commodities, it is a useful and enjoyable lens through which to explore the numerous perspectives and topics of the human experience.