Generally, scholars examining the history of alcohol in the United States tend to focus on one, or a combination of, the following: temperance reform and prohibition as a success or a failure; various organizations, such as the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Anti-Saloon League (ASL); political figures and politicians and the liquor question; or broader social, cultural, or gender issues. On the other hand, some academic and more popular works of history focus on the rise of organized crime in numerous narratives centered on Gotham or the “Windy City.” However, in *We Are What We Drink: The Temperance Battle in Minnesota*, Sabine N. Meyer challenges the traditional narrative of the temperance movement and temperance historiography. Instead of a broad, organizational history centered in a bustling East Coast city, Meyer examines the upper portions of the American Midwest with a particular focus on identity formation in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Meyer’s overarching argument is that “the temperance movement served as a catalyst of ethnic identity construction and negotiation for both German and Irish Americans. It caused German Americans to invent and Irish Americans to re-negotiate their ethnic identities and to reposition themselves in the Anglo-American society. The temperance movement was one of the real-life contexts in which negotiations of ethnic identities took place” (p. 198). Focusing on the formation and social construction of ethnic identity in Minnesota, Meyer writes that she was influenced by her adviser, the late Rudolph Vecoli. She posits that a holistic examination of the temperance movement in Minnesota will uncover previously neglected aspects of the fight to ban intoxicating spirits. She claims that such a view “demands we engage in a bottom-up, rather than a top-down, approach to the organizations, communities, and individuals involved in the fight for or against liquor so that we can begin to see what temperance or the fight against it meant to each of them” (p. 2).

Chapter 1, “‘Westward the Jug of Empire’: The Emergence of a Temperance Movement in Minnesota (1819-1865),” opens with a vignette by Mark Twain. The “jug of whiskey,” Twain humorously stated, was “the earliest pioneer of civilization.” Although alcohol did play a role in the early settlement of the region, Meyer keenly demonstrates, “the temperance movement was not merely an imitation and transplantation of Eastern anti-liquor activism but also a response to the rampant whiskey consumption that preceded and accompanies the process of settlement.” The aftereffects of the movement were long-lasting and future temperance activists advocated for “blue laws”
while making “their specific cultural values the core of the region’s dominant narrative” (p. 17).

Meyer’s second chapter, “Organizing into Blocs: The Fight for or against Personal Liberty (1866-1887),” discusses the development of temperance politics in Minnesota. After the conclusion of the Civil War, the Democratic and Republican Parties “negotiated their position within the legal battles about alcohol.” Minnesota’s Democratic Party became associated with personal liberty attracting German Americans and a strong Catholic base, while the Republican Party “refused to hazard the success of the great Republican Party” by promoting anti-liquor legislation (p. 54).

Beginning with a discussion of temperance legislation, chapter 3, “‘Talking against a Stonewall’: The High License Consensus (1888-1897),” begins the move toward total prohibition culminating with the birth of one of America’s strongest lobby organizations, Minnesota’s state chapter of the ASL. Many Minnesotan reformers, including members of the WCTU, the Prohibition Party, and various religious denominations—as well German Americans who were involved with the brewing process—opposed the High License Law. The groups hoping for prohibition, however, were “realistic enough to know that chances for prohibition were not particularly high at the moment” (p. 95). Instead, these anti-drink groups advocated for a more timely and realistic reform, the county option.

Chapter 4, “‘Putting on the Lid’: The Anti-Saloon League and Its Impact on the Dry Movement (1898-1915),” addresses the efforts of Minnesota’s progressives and argues that the founding of Minnesota’s ASL in 1898 was a turning point in the history of temperance in the North Star State. The ASL was different. Unlike other groups, Meyer notes, the slogan of the ASL, “‘The Saloon Must Go,’ indicates that it worked against the saloon more than against liquor consumption as such, because, in a truly Progressive manner, it defined the saloon, and not the individual, as the root of intemperance” (p. 126). The ASL organized and focused their efforts in major cities like Minneapolis and St. Paul and their grassroots efforts—along with cooperating with the WCTU, the Prohibition Party, and the Independent Order of Good Templars—to enact County Option laws. By the summer of 1915, fifty-one out of Minnesota’s eighty-six counties “were dry through County Option elections and through the enforcement of the old Indian treaties” (p. 137). Finally, this chapter displays the rise of increased female participation in the public sphere coupled with the downfall of ethnic German and Irish participation in temperance activism and opposition.

Meyer’s chapter 5, “Equating Temperance with Patriotism: The Great War and the Liquor Question (1916-1919),” couples the peak of wartime prohibition efforts with the founding of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety (MNCPS). According to Meyer, those who crusaded for a dry Minnesota found a new and rather powerful ally in the MNCPS. After the passage of local option laws at the county level, it took only two and a half years for the reformers to succeed “in gradually drying up large parts of the state by Indian treaty and County or Local Option” (p. 166). This final chapter illustrates what happened to German and Irish populations as well as women when the United States entered the First World War. With Europe erupting in war in 1914 and the eventual passage of the National Prohibition Act in September of 1919, many German-owned breweries like “Generals Pabst, Schlitz, Lemp, Anheuser-Bush,” among others, became targets of congressional investigations, and this scrutiny “dealt a deadly blow to the brewers’ reputation and greatly contributed to the demise of liquor” (p. 169). Meanwhile, as the loyalty of German Americans and their business ventures slowly became a national security issue, individuals living in St. Paul fought over the prospects of prohibition while members of Minnesota’s WCTU worked for wartime prohibition. Under the administra-
tion of Governor Joseph A. A. Burnquist, by 1920, women gained the right to vote. Meyer concludes: “For the first time, women's public identity was formally and officially acknowledged,” which made “women official players in the dominant public sphere,” signifying “a paradigm shift in gender relations” laying the foundations for “the emergence of a female consciousness, solidarity, self-confidence, and expertise” (p. 197).

Meyer's *We Are What We Drink* is an innovative and rather ambitious example of historical scholarship. Meyer examines the relationship between the identities of Irish and German populations, St. Paulites, and reform-minded women crusading for the temperance cause in the Land of 10,000 Lakes. *We Are What We Drink* is one of few examples of scholarship that examines temperance in the American Midwest. Although there are other monographs, such as David Fahey's *The Women's Temperance Crusade in Oxford, Ohio* (2010), Jed Dannebaum's *Drink and Disorder: Temperance Reform in Cincinnati from the Washingtonian Revival to the WCTU* (1984), and K. Austin Kerr's *Organized for Prohibition: A New History of the Anti-Saloon League* (1985), that consider temperance activity in the Midwest—Ohio in particular—Meyer's *We Are What We Drink* fills a lingering lacuna in this scholarship. Not only does *We Are What We Drink* shift temperance scholarship to a state in which is not normally considered in this subfield of the historical profession, but it also considers ethnic and civic identities, which is both vetted in theory and historiography—something that is seemingly absent in older scholarship.

*We Are What We Drink* is a welcome addition to the expanding scholarly interest of the history of the American Midwest. Meyer's work intersects the histories of women, reform movements, alcohol, German and Irish populations, and Minnesota. As this book intersects numerous subjects, it has utility in the classroom. I do not see this as a strong candidate for undergraduate courses, but it would be unique in a seminar setting. Outside of the classroom, scholars throughout the humanities interested in an innovative work of literature should certainly add Meyer's work to their libraries.