
Reviewed by Robert Shea Terrell (Syracuse University)

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Commissioned by Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

Malcolm F. Purinton’s *Globalization in a Glass: The Rise of Pilsner Beer through Technology, Taste and Empire* marks the latest entry in the growing history of beer and brewing. In it, he aims to explain the rise of pilsner, the light, golden lager that has enjoyed more than a century and a half of seemingly unassailable global dominance in the production and consumption of beer. He argues that in the latter half of the nineteenth century, central European and later global brewers developed and embraced new technologies, increased scientific control, and catered toward a shifting global taste preference for the lower-alcohol, highly carbonated, golden lager.

One of the most valuable central arguments for historians of beer is that the rise of pilsner was not simply a story of unidirectional conquest but rather one of global change. While the book emphasizes the British Empire, a recurring theme is just how badly British brewers navigated global changes in brewing. Central European migrants and know-how were crucial to the story, as was the development of diverse local industries and markets from places like Argentina and Japan. Imperialism and direct metropolitan investment in business and infrastructure played a key role, but so too did colonized and settler populations operating in an increasingly global marketplace. In South Africa, for example, British brewing practices and preferences for heavier, darker ales ultimately lost out to enterprising colonial brewers following continental practices and catering to the tastes of local laborers. Consumers around the world, both within the British colonies and beyond them, Purinton argues, chose lighter beers brewed by a constellation of continental exporters, emerging colonial enterprises, and new non-Western competitors. While the sun may have never set on the British Empire at its height, global dominance was not enough to ensure control, or even success, in a globalizing market.
The book spans six chapters, two focused on technology and science, one on business strategy, two on global connections via migration and empire, and one on changes in consumer tastes. The first five, Purinton notes, explain the **how** of pilsner’s global rise, while the last one explains the **why**. Business historians and historians of industrial food production are likely to find much to like in the first three chapters. Here, Purinton is at his best in outlining the industry and business of beer. He makes plain the importance of new technologies, scientific control, and standardized brewing education, as well as the crucial role of joint stock investment strategies and the managerial revolution. He shows convincingly how saccharometers, refrigeration, and training in subjects like biology transformed brewing practices both in Europe and in developing industries in many places including Brazil and South Africa. In the process, he shows the devastation wrought by **not** adopting such developments as the British brewing industry, once the most advanced in the world, with access to the largest imperial trade network the world had ever seen, failed to take advantage. These insights into different business practices in Britain, central Europe, and, later, around the world are valuable as part of a comparative history of business strategy and management that emphasizes the role of science and technology in facilitating product consistency and economies of scale.

The book thus offers much for those interested in the business, science, and technology of modern brewing. Some of the overarching arguments, however, are somewhat less convincing. *Globalization in a Glass* promises to chart the rise of pilsner beer in particular. Pilsner is a golden-colored lager (defined by the use of bottom-fermenting yeast at cooler temperatures), but much of the evidence that Purinton draws on—or at least his writing—conflates pilsner with lager more generally. It is clear that pilsner **has** established global dominance. Look in any store in any country. But the spread of lager brewing may not be enough to explain that. Not all lager is golden in color and not all lager is light. Purinton himself notes that the earliest lagers in the United States, for example, were dark lagers, today most familiar in the form of Yuengling and Samuel Adams Boston Lager. In many parts of the book, the categories of lager and pilsner are quite muddled. In his longer American case study of Philadelphia’s Engel & Wolf’s Brewery, for example, Purinton emphasizes the production of lager by a Bavarian brewer who had left Europe in 1840, that is, before pilsner was invented in 1842, and who we learn was brewing nondescript lager by 1844. This would have been years before pilsner and lager had established their dominance even in Germany.[1] By his own admission, even the use of crucial instruments of control in lager production like thermometers and saccharometers barely got beyond the Munich Spaten brewery until 1845. In numerous global case studies, Purinton demonstrates the emergence of increasingly industrial lager production, but he often fails to explain how pilsner, as opposed to any other lager, came out on top.

Because of this slippage, a great deal rides on the final chapter, which seeks to explain a global transformation of taste preferences for pilsner. One wants to agree that it was because “pilsner was imbued with the taste of purity and modernity”—a scientific, clean, healthy, consistent, and abundant drink that was light and refreshing, making it well suited to many forms of labor and mass consumption (p. 140). But we do not quite see evidence for this claim. The chapter essentially amounts to an analysis of British brewers’ journals rather than engagement with global articulations of taste, or “narratives, made up of metaphors and adjectives … that the historian may use when researching and explaining changes in taste over time” (p. 141). The chapter’s case study of South Africa reads like another analysis of industry documents and transitions to lighter beer in general, and most often at the level of business rather than consumption. The most convincing
consumer-based discussion refers to poor white and Malay migrant consumption of “tickey beer,” a South African original made from reusing a mash of malt from a porter, stout, or pale ale, which results in an abundant, cheap beer with a much lower alcohol by volume (p. 155). This discussion evinces consumer demand for cheaper, lighter-colored, lower-alcohol ales, but that is not quite the same thing as a globalization of taste for pilsner, or even lager, as an embodiment of modernity.

There is much to like about this book and the criticisms here are primarily of framing. The book might falter in elucidating the globalization of pilsner, but it does achieve many other important goals, including explaining the global dominance of lager production broadly as well as how British brewers, once the dominant force in the world, lost out in a global industrial boom. Ultimately, Purinton brings together valuable threads of analysis in the history of the brewing industry—science, technology, and business and managerial practice—and also offers a global framework that begins to reveal the simultaneous and multidirectional dynamics of industrial beer production and mass consumption. Beyond critiques of framing, he thus charts a valuable course for the ongoing global history of beer and brewing—a course that, one can hope, might become increasingly nuanced as scholars working more deeply in other languages adapt and apply some of his central insights to further sidestep singular national or imperial narratives.

Note

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