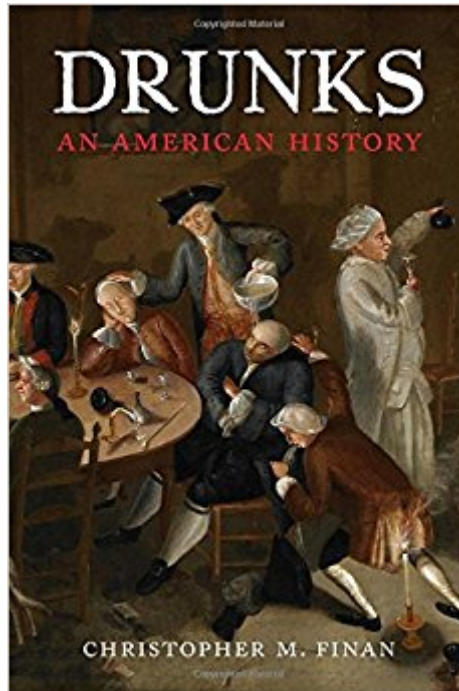




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Drunks: An American History



Synopsis

A social history of alcoholism in the United States, from the seventeenth century to the present day. Today, millions of Americans are struggling with alcoholism, but millions are also in long-term recovery from addiction. Alcoholics Anonymous and a growing number of recovery organizations are providing support for alcoholics who will face the danger of relapse for the rest of their lives. We have finally come to understand that alcoholism is a treatable illness. But in the beginning, our nation condemned drunks for moral weakness. President John Adams renounced his alcoholic son, Charles, and refused to bury him in the family crypt. Christopher Finan reveals the history of our struggle with alcoholism and the emergence of a search for sobriety that began among Native Americans in the colonial period. He introduces us to the first of a colorful cast of characters, a remarkable Iroquois leader named Handsome Lake, a drunk who stopped drinking and dedicated his life to helping his people achieve sobriety. In the early nineteenth century, the idealistic and energetic "Washingtonians," a group of reformed alcoholics, led the first national movement to save men like themselves. After the Civil War, doctors began to recognize that chronic drunkenness is an illness, and Dr. Leslie Keeley invented a "gold cure" that was dispensed at more than a hundred clinics around the country. But most Americans rejected a scientific explanation of alcoholism. A century after the ignominious death of Charles Adams came Carrie Nation. The wife of a drunk, she destroyed bars with a hatchet in her fury over what alcohol had done to her family. Prohibition became the law of the land, but nothing could stop the drinking. Finan also tells the dramatic story of Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, who helped each other stay sober and then created AA, which survived its tumultuous early years and finally proved that alcoholics could stay sober for a lifetime. This is narrative history at its best: entertaining and authoritative, an important portrait of one of America's great liberation movements.

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Customer Reviews

“An appropriately harrowing account of booze and its discontents...A worthy treatment of recovery movements in American history, unsung heroes and all.” —Kirkus Reviews
“A spirited look at the history of drinking and alcoholism in America... offers captivating stories in a well-researched, in-depth manner, shining a light on a topic well worth exploring in detail.” —Publishers Weekly
“Drunks is a lively, engaging, and enlightening account of a major strain (in several senses of the word) of the American character. We drank our way to nationhood, and some of us drank too much. Cheers!” —Richard Rhodes, Pulitzer Prize recipient for *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*
“Drunks is a fascinating history of the recovery movement that allowed me to consider my own sobriety in a broader context. Chris Finan recounts in entertaining and compelling style the experiences of those who fought to have alcoholism recognized as an illness and broke barriers in trying to treat it. I was transported throughout this journey and would like to think I might have joined the ‘Marthas,’ a group of mid-nineteenth-century women who were on the front lines of the battle against the deadly ravages of alcoholism. Finan has written an outstanding book that should take its place alongside the definitive texts detailing other medical and cultural issues in American society.” —Lisa Smith, author of *Girl Walks Out of a Bar*
“Alcohol, prescription meds, marijuana: addiction has been a problem for centuries in America. But as Chris Finan’s inspiring book chronicles, people helping people is the solution. Millions of alcoholics and addicts are living sober lives. And so there is hope for those who are still suffering.” —William C. Moyers, author of *Broken: My Story of Addiction and Redemption* and vice president at Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation

Christopher M. Finan is the author of *From the Palmer Raids to the Patriot Act: A History of the Fight for Free Speech in America* and *Alfred E. Smith: The Happy Warrior*. He is the executive director of National Coalition Against Censorship and former director of American Booksellers for Free Expression, a program of the American Booksellers Association. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Excellent

So far, this is proving to be a very interesting book about a topic I was only somewhat familiar with. I am an Americanist by training, so I was well aware of how much Americans drank before the 20th century -- but apart from studying the occasional "temperance novel" that often accompanied various Revivalist and temperance movements in the 19th century, I was mostly in the dark about how alcoholism was treated -- if at all -- in the days before and shortly after its "discovery" as a disease (rather than a moral failure). Things I like about the book are its overall readability, its linear chronology, and a weighty inclusion of original source materials: Finan includes a great deal of first-hand information on every page, which until now, I've only really encountered in fictional, literary accounts (i.e. the temperance novels and pamphlets that were purposely meant to scare youth away from alcohol). I am also enjoying the pace, which I was worried about initially since I thought it would jump too quickly into the advent of AA (which is clearly what Finan **really** seems to want to discuss in this book). Finan actually begins in the colonial period (which could be a longer section) -- with Native Americans' experiences with alcohol -- and then moves quickly to the 1840s, when temperance groups really got going (the Washingtonians, Sons of Temperance, "inebriate asylums," etc.). He then moves, at last, into Prohibition and AA territory. I do have some minor complaints, however. Because of my knowledge of early American temperance fiction, I fully expected to hear about at least a handful of these tales of woe and vice -- they were quite popular in their time (mostly as potboilers and quick income sources for their authors). But by page 70, there still isn't a word on them. Indeed, Finan seems to ignore art and literature as a whole in this book. (And given the arts' reputation for being relatively tied to alcohol, this, I think, is a shortcoming.) Similarly, Finan seems to be concerned with the reformation of "drunks," and not at all with the every-day portrayals of them by others. What we know about the behavior of early American alcoholics -- at least as given to us in this book -- is only from how reformed men described **themselves** as they were when still drinking. Indeed, Finan writes: "The Journal of the American Temperance Union said that the public was growing bored listening to drunks tell their life stories." So, it would have also been interesting to see more of how others portrayed them (for they certainly did?) in addition to how reformed men portrayed themselves. In addition, although the book is clearly "An American History," I wanted to see at least a little more about how alcoholism was treated (again, if at all) in other places in the world. Finan doesn't include really any comparative information on how, say, alcoholics were dealt with in Europe (workhouses and/or debtor's prisons, I assume?); the lack of comparison points makes it seem as though the problems with alcohol that Americans faced were head-and-shoulders above those of anywhere else in the world. I just can't imagine this

to be strictly true. Certainly, again, Americans did drink quite heavily, and temperance was a much more popular movement here than elsewhere. But the utter lack of information on treatments occurring anywhere else is the elephant in the room -- and this elephant verges on making the book a paragon of that now-hated phrase "American exceptionalism" -- even concerning America's many faults! *Were* there no other treatments apart from those in the U.S., we can wonder? Or even, were there no other drunks? (But please do correct me if I have missed this information in the book somehow...) Overall, I recommend the book with reservations. It's a short history and there are no notes -- only source citations at the end. But it is easy to read, entertaining at times, and interesting almost always.

I was surprised to read about how early some Americans regarded alcoholism as a disease that could be treated and, if the patient was motivated, cured. Certainly this was not a majority opinion, and a general puritan vs. sinner attitude prevailed for much of time before Alcoholics Anonymous, and even now. *Drunks: An American History* is a short, well-written book that shows how alcoholism has been a part of American life since the settlers arrived (but not before -- the effects of alcohol on previously sober Native Americans was devastating) and how people dealt with the problem. Prohibition, contrary to some histories, was a desperate solution to a problem that just seemed to get worse. Quite an eye-opening and sympathetic bit of social history.

Drunks is an important and very interesting and informative book. Much of it is written so well that it reads like a novel. We not only learn about the effects of alcoholism, but how it impacted the history of America. There is a rather long fascinating disturbing narrative of how alcohol destroyed the Native Americans, how the whites used it to steal from the Indians. It also destroyed families. President Adams had a son who also became a president and another who became a very good historian. But there was another son who was afflicted by alcoholism and despite all they tried to do, the presidents were unable to save the son who died from alcoholism at age 30. Besides many stories, the book points out that today we know that alcoholism is a disease and there are ways to treat it. One of these, considered by many to be the best, is AA. A couple of decades ago, I was the Army officer who handled all matters related to religion and law. I was asked to comment upon an army regulation that required alcoholic soldiers to attend AA. I saw that AA is based on religion, giving one's self over to a higher power. I was interested in protecting the First Amendment to the Constitution's free exercise rights of every American and felt that atheists would not feel comfortable with this approach, even though it has value for religiously-minded people. So I

changed the regulation to allow any soldier to go to a program such as AA including programs that do not require adherents to believe in a higher power.

This isn't the most definitive history of alcoholism in the United States, but it's a pretty good effort from Christopher Finan. Starting with the poignant story of President John Adam's alcoholic son who died at age 30, the author takes us through the early colonial days and beyond. The stories of Handsome Lake, an Iroquois leader who fought hard against drinking, and John H. W. Hawkins are two of the most moving in the book for me. Almost half of the book is devoted to A.A. and its origins, which some readers may or may not enjoy. I personally wish it would've been a bit shorter than that. The only caveat I'd have about DRUNKS is that Finan sometimes uses too many different terms to describe the same person: "sober drunks," "refined drunks," and "poisoned drinkers." The bottom line is, if you have a drinking problem, you need to get help and stop drinking completely. And there is hope for everyone who wants to quit drinking.

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