

Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition by Daniel Okrent

Book Description from Amazon.com

A brilliant, authoritative, and fascinating history of America's most puzzling era, the years 1920 to 1933, when the U.S. Constitution was amended to restrict one of America's favorite pastimes: drinking alcoholic beverages.

From its start, America has been awash in drink. The sailing vessel that brought John Winthrop to the shores of the New World in 1630 carried more beer than water. By the 1820s, liquor flowed so plentifully it was cheaper than tea. That Americans would *ever* agree to relinquish their booze was as improbable as it was astonishing.

Yet we did, and *Last Call* is Daniel Okrent's dazzling explanation of why we did it, what life under Prohibition was like, and how such an unprecedented degree of government interference in the private lives of Americans changed the country forever.

Writing with both wit and historical acuity, Okrent reveals how Prohibition marked a confluence of diverse forces: the growing political power of the women's suffrage movement, which allied itself with the antiliquor campaign; the fear of small-town, native-stock Protestants that they were losing control of their country to the immigrants of the large cities; the anti-German sentiment stoked by World War I; and a variety of other unlikely factors, ranging from the rise of the automobile to the advent of the income tax.

Through it all, Americans kept drinking, going to remarkably creative lengths to smuggle, sell, conceal, and convivially (and sometimes fatally) imbibe their favorite intoxicants. *Last Call* is peopled with vivid characters of an astonishing variety: Susan B. Anthony and Billy Sunday, William Jennings Bryan and bootlegger Sam Bronfman, Pierre S. du Pont and H. L. Mencken, Meyer Lansky and the incredible—if long-forgotten—federal official Mabel Walker Willebrandt, who throughout the twenties was the most powerful woman in the country. (Perhaps most surprising of all is Okrent's account of Joseph P. Kennedy's legendary, and long-misunderstood, role in the liquor business.)

It's a book rich with stories from nearly all parts of the country. Okrent's narrative runs through smoky Manhattan speakeasies, where relations between the sexes were changed forever; California vineyards busily producing "sacramental" wine; New England fishing communities that gave up fishing for the more lucrative rum-running business; and in Washington, the halls of Congress itself, where politicians who had voted for Prohibition drank openly and without apology.

Last Call is capacious, meticulous, and thrillingly told. It stands as the most complete history of Prohibition ever written and confirms Daniel Okrent's rank as a major American writer.

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Daniel Okrent has proven to be one of our most interesting and eclectic writers of nonfiction over the past 25 years, producing books about the history of Rockefeller Center and New England, baseball, and his experience as the first public editor for the *New York Times*. Now he has taken on a

more formidable subject: the origins, implementation, and failure of that great American delusion known as Prohibition. The result may not be as scintillating as the perfect gin gimlet, but it comes mighty close, an assiduously researched, well-written, and continually eye-opening work on what has actually been a neglected subject. There has been, of course, quite a lot of writing that has touched on the 14 years, 1919–1933, when the United States tried to legislate drinking out of existence, but the great bulk of it has been as background to one mobster tale or another. Okrent covers the gangland explosion that Prohibition triggered—and rightly deromanticizes it—but he has a wider agenda that addresses the entire effect enforced temperance had on our social, political, and legal conventions. Above all, Okrent explores the politics of Prohibition; how the 18th Amendment, banning the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating beverages, was pushed through after one of the most sustained and brilliant pressure-group campaigns in our history; how the fight over booze served as a surrogate for many of the deeper social and ethnic antagonisms dividing the country, and how it all collapsed, almost overnight, essentially nullified by the

people. Okrent occasionally stumbles in this story, bogging down here and there in some of the backroom intricacies of the politics, and misconstruing an address by Warren Harding on race as one of the boldest speeches ever delivered by an American president (it was more nearly the opposite). But overall he provides a fascinating look at a fantastically complex battle that was fought out over decades—no easy feat. Among other delights, Okrent passes along any number of amusing tidbits about how Americans coped without alcohol, such as sending away for the *Vino Sano Grape Brick*, a block of dehydrated grape juice, complete with stems, skins, and pulp and instructions warning buyers not to add yeast or sugar, or leave it in a dark place, or let it sit too long, lest it become wine. He unearths many sadly forgotten characters from the war over drink—and readers will be surprised to learn how that fight cut across today's ideological lines. Progressives and suffragists made common cause with the Ku Klux Klan—which in turn supported a woman's right to vote—to pass Prohibition. Champions of the people, such as the liberal Democrat Al Smith, fought side-by-side with conservative plutocrats like Pierre du Pont for its repeal. In the end, as Okrent makes clear, Prohibition did

make a dent in American drinking—at the cost of hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries from bad bootleg alcohol; the making of organized crime in this country; and a corrosive soaking in hypocrisy. A valuable lesson, for anyone willing to hear it. *Kevin Baker is the coauthor, most recently, of Luna Park, a graphic novel published last month by DC Comics.*

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From Bookmarks Magazine

Okrent, who has rescued an important, relevant, and colorful chapter of American history, explores Americans' relationship with the bottle dating back to the colonial era and analyzes the long-term effects of Prohibition on everything--from the rise of the Mafia and the Ku Klux Klan to language, art, and literature. Fast-paced and fascinating, his narrative assembles a wide collection of comical stories and outrageous personalities, such as the hatchet-wielding Carrie Nation. He explodes clichés and bypasses widely known tales of bootlegging and bathtub gin in favor of more unfamiliar accounts. Critics praised Okrent's elegant writing and careful research--even in

all its details--and agreed with the *New York Times Book Review* that this remarkably fresh take on a forgotten era is "a narrative delight."

About the Author

Daniel Okrent was the first public editor of The New York Times, editor-at-large of Time, Inc., and managing editor of Life magazine. He worked in book publishing as an editor at Knopf and Viking, and was editor-in-chief of general books at Harcourt Brace. He was also a featured commentator on Ken Burns's PBS series, *Baseball*, and is author of four books, one of which, *Great Fortune*, was a finalist for the 2004 Pulitzer Prize in history. Okrent was also a fellow at the Shorenstein Center at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, where he remains an Associate. He lives in Manhattan and on Cape Cod with his wife, poet Rebecca Okrent. They have two children.