

ALEHOUSES AND GOOD FELLOWSHIP IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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Mark Hailwood's excellent book makes the case for the early modern English alehouse as a vital institution in the lives of the non-urban poor, alongside the household, church, courts, manor and parish. People drank in alehouses – small beer, at about 2% (a healthy alternative to water), or strong beer, at anywhere between 5 and 12% – but they did other things, too. Alehouses could serve as spaces for sealing business deals, or looking for work, or talking politics, or trading goods, or – as Hailwood rather enigmatically puts it – 'as relatively safe settings for courtship'. But the alehouse mode that Hailwood prioritises comes under the hazy category of 'good fellowship': a form of early modern social bonding, based around rituals of toasting, drinking competitions, games and songs which collectively expressed values of 'courage, self-control, loyalty, financial prosperity' and 'hard work'. Women played important role, as drinkers but also as alehouse owners: figures like widow Edith Pearce of Somerset, who requested a 1627 licence as 'a sole woman having foure small children and noe other living to give her selfe and Children maintenance'. Hailwood's alehouse is not a place for the pursuit of drunken oblivion: it's a happier venue, a site of recreational drinking as a form of 'purposeful and meaningful social interaction.'

The book toggles between two scales: it works hard to generate a sense of the particular, to conjure the alehouse with its table and benches, the printed ballads stuck to the walls, the fire, the broiled herring suppers, the songs booming from the alebench, and the individuated drinkers like Thomas Marsh who in 1604 sat slumped (in Hailwood's memorable words) 'foaming at the mouth in his own effluent'. From these particulars, Hailwood builds broader arguments about the place of drinking spaces in early modern England, which means mapping on to some familiar historiographical hotspots: the rise of the public sphere; early modern conceptions of order; the nature of popular political discourse. In the alehouse, Hailwood finds something like a proto-coffee house for the poor that produced a kind of hobbling, 'ersatz public sphere'. Unlike Jürgen Habermas's model of civil and reasonable debate, alehouse discourse was conveyed through the 'boozy toast' or 'scatological quip'. And (Hailwood argues) alehouses were not places for the radical reimagining of society. Ministers and magistrates may have condemned alehouses as (in the words of Sir Richard Grosvenor in 1625) a 'receptacle for knaves and harlots', and Wiltshire miller William Dawkins, several pints to the good, may have called the Book of Common Prayer a 'Common Turd'; but Hailwood finds a kind of political discourse that is less about overturning church and state, and more concerned with parish-level disputes and 'everyday forms of resistance'.

Hailwood offers rich readings of the legislative framework and of ballads with winning titles like *The Seamens Wives Frolick Over A Bowl of Punch*, but a major part of his methodology, in the tradition of Keith Thomas, is the piling up of vignettes from the archives. These 'fragments of alebench talk', as Hailwood nicely puts it, are often riveting but their brevity means it's hard to know how to respond. A document in the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre records that miller William Dawkins declared 'I care not a fart for a King, nor for never a Magistrate in England'. But is this 1665 remark an intended catalyst for another revolution? A joke? A quote from a

song? An impersonation? Something misheard or misremembered? Is this the 12% ale talking? One consequence of gathering these shreds is that sources tend to balance out: Hailwood's book is characterized by a kind of *via media* reasonableness (one of his favourite words is ambivalence) which is in part the result of weighing up lots of little pieces of evidence. The argument drifts to the centre, and the political stances of Hailwood's drinkers resemble his own methodology: they occupy 'a range of positions', and constitute a 'heterogeneous' culture.

There is a darker story to be told of the alehouse, of alcoholism and poverty and marginalization, but that story is also more familiar. One gets a sense (despite the nightmarish vision of drinkers like Edmund Saurer who 'did vomite upon the Communion Table') that Hailwood himself is a fan of the modern equivalent of the early modern alehouse, and a sense of authorial delight, respect and interest pervades his compelling book.