ANIL AGGRAWAL'S
Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology
The world's first online journal devoted entirely to forensic medicine and toxicology · Published 1 January and 1 July

VOL. 11, NO. 1
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_011_no_001/reviews/pb/page001.html

Book Reviews: Popular Books Section



...A WELL RESEARCHED HISTORY OF ALCOHOL The book discusses how at virtually all times in history, people and the society have been largely undecided on whether wine was good or bad; and how their conclusions kept changing with dynamic reasoning. Ever thought what good alcohol did? Well! one of the good things it did was to bring people together at a café!! The book gives numerous other excerpts and interesting anecdotes. It is a simple, lucid yet interesting volume that is bound to keep you reading...Overall this is a light-mood, good-times, effortless-reading compilation and a lot like a dessert...

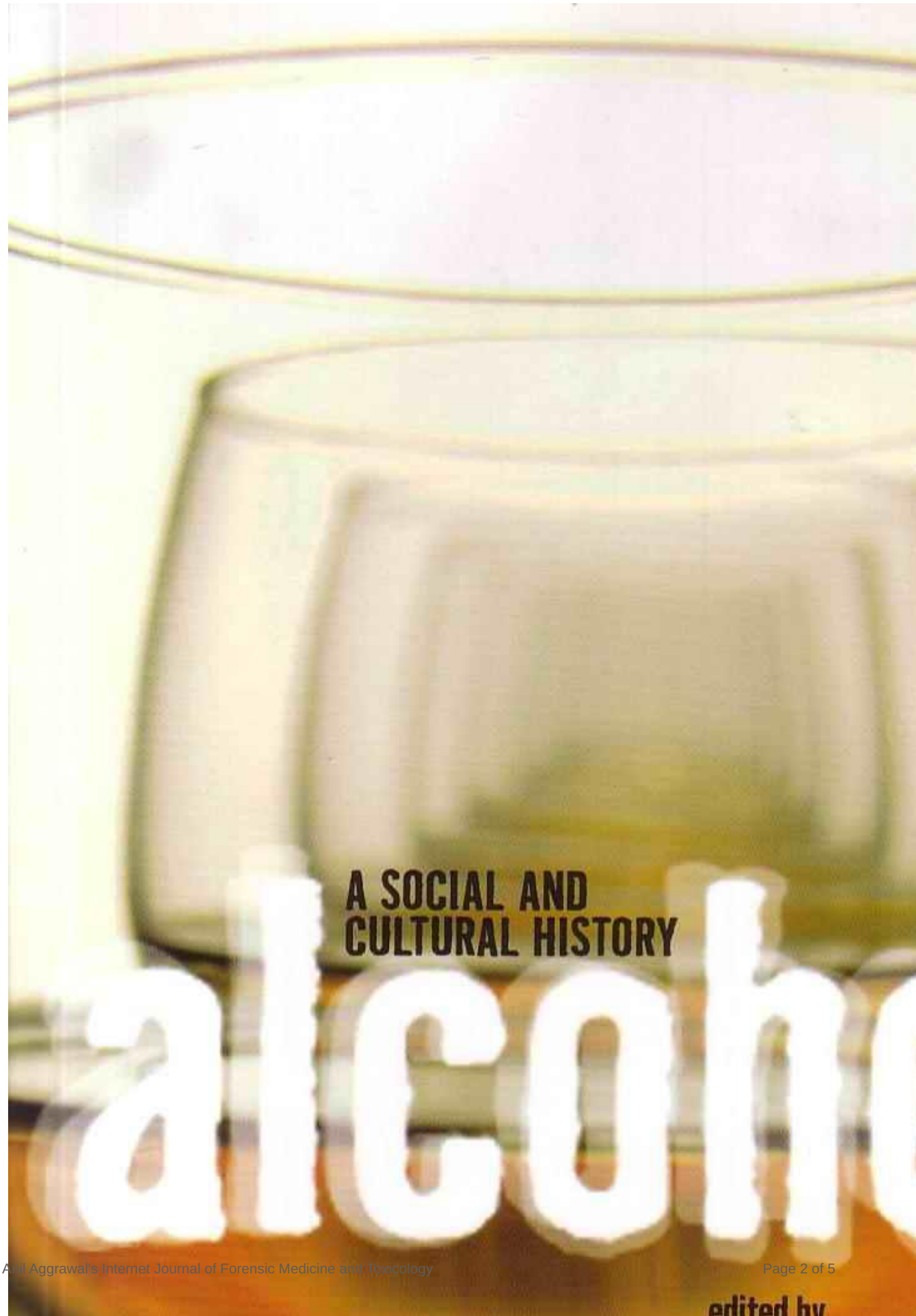
Alcohol : A Social and Cultural History *edited by* Mack P. Holt. softcover, 9.2" x 6.3" x 0.9"

Berg Publishers, 1st Floor, Angel Court, 81 St Clements Street, Oxford OX4 1AW, UK. . . Publication Date June 12, 2006. 288 pages, ISBN-10: 1845201655. ISBN-13: 978-1845201654. Price £17.99

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A SOCIAL AND
CULTURAL HISTORY
alcoh
edited by

The title is a compilation of essays, written by numerous professors of history, which shed light on the cultural and social impact alcohol had in the Western world in the middle, and how it has shaped the society of today. The French revolution, the Renaissance, the salons of the West, the social order and disorder that existed at the time, and even medicine and religion of the time; the one thing common to all the above is 'Alcohol'! Intriguing, that is what the title is.

The book discusses how even at that time people the society was largely undecided on whether wine was good or bad, how the conclusion kept changing with dynamic reasoning. Ever thought what good alcohol did? Well one of the things was bringing people together at a café. The title gives numerous other excerpts. It is a simple, lucid yet interesting volume that is bound to keep you reading, even though it lacks the glitter of modern commercialized novels.

The content is well-structured, with nicely woven essays one after the other, it is nothing like a boring History textbook. General history has been kept to a minimum. One downside though is the lack of elementary descriptions of what different forms of alcohol actually is, considering the significance the different forms had. Overall this is a light-mood, good-times, effortless-reading compilation and a lot like a dessert.



-Nipun Malhotra
Nipun Malhotra is a young medical student currently studying medicine and surgery at the prestigious Maulana Azad Medical College, New Delhi. His passion is history and pharmacology of pharmaceutical drugs and toxins. He hopes to become a leading toxicologist. Nipun may be contacted by clicking here.

Excerpts from the book:

This book is the one of the very few which deal with social and cultural history of alcohol in such an entertaining way. The editors at the journal office decided to excerpt parts of the book, so reader could know exactly what is there in the book. Here is what Charles C. Ludington has to write in chapter 10...

"To the King o'er the Water" - Scotland and Claret, c. 1660-1763

While popular taste in England took an abrupt turn from French wine to Portuguese wine during the late Stuart and early Hanoverian era, and newly invented luxury claret became the wine for the fashionable English elite, the same was not true in Scotland, where inexpensive, traditionally made claret predominated in aristocratic cellars, political clubs, urban howffs, and Highland taverns for the first half of the eighteenth century. This point, seemingly unremarkable given the very real differences in the cultural practices of the two Stuart kingdoms that were united in 1707, is significant for the fact that one of the principal features of the Treaty of Union was the equalization of duties at the English level for almost all goods, including wine. This chapter will attempt to show how and why the relatively poor Scots continued to drink claret when popular English taste had been coerced by financial considerations and encouraged by a particular definition of patriotism to switch to port.

As in England, Scottish taste for claret was deeply ingrained. In Scotland, claret consumption began no later than the thirteenth century, when English and Gascon merchants found a ready market for wine north of the Cheviot Hills. Soon, however, Scottish fondness for claret was too great to be entrusted to foreign merchants alone, and the Scots themselves ventured south to the Bay of Biscay to retrieve greater quantities and values of wine than any other commodity from their new ally France. Indeed, from an economic standpoint if not from a cultural one as well, claret has aptly been called the "lifeblood of the Auld Alliance." The gradual decline of Franco-Scottish political and economic relations during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had little influence upon Scottish taste for wine; between 1660 and 1689, one in ten Scottish vessels was employed in the French trade, which was primarily concerned with "the young wine from the Gironde, shipped mainly from Bordeaux." More extraordinary still, the Parliamentary Union with England was equally ineffective in disrupting Scottish taste for wine. In fact, the Wine Act of 1703, passed by an angry Scottish Parliament, had established French wine-and in Scotland that meant claret-as a commodity with which to defy the English government.

High levels of fraud and smuggling in Scotland, as well as fraud and smuggling at high levels, allowed claret to continue in this symbolic role after the Union of 1707. Scottish administrative disregard and even involvement in illegal importation of claret ensured that the flow of wine from Bordeaux to "North Britain" was not stanched by a legislative Union with France's greatest rival. Instead, patriotic Scots (Jacobites or not) grasped at claret for its potent symbolism. Not only did claret represent Scottish taste prior to the Union but, as such, it represented Scottish grievances within, and resistance to, the Union. This was particularly true in the aftermath of 1745, when Scotland was increasingly brought under Westminster's control. As anglicization increased, so too did the symbolic potency of claret. In short, whether it was consumed by active or passive Jacobites, Unionists or anti-Unionists, Tories or Whigs, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, or Catholics, claret represented something far more than a familiar taste: it represented a nostalgic idea of independent Scotland.

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