



Smugglers, Bootleggers, and Scofflaws: Prohibition and New York City, Ellen NicKenzie Lawson. Albany: SUNY Press, 2013. (174 pp.)

In 1955, Richard Hofstadter wrote confidently: "To the historian... the story of Prohibition will seem like a historical detour, a meaningless nuisance, an extraneous imposition upon the main course of history. The truth is that Prohibition appeared to the men of the twenties as a major issue because it was a major issue..."¹ Dozens of films, Broadway shows, and popular television

series later, historians and others could be forgiven for agreeing only with the first part of Hofstadter's analysis. In popular culture, Prohibition appears to have been more of an experiment, or a quirk, than a subject for close scholarly inspection. But in her new book *Smugglers, Bootleggers, and Scofflaws*, Ellen NicKenzie Lawson mines a fantastic trove of little-used sources to detail the experience of Prohibition for three distinct but related groups of then-criminals in New York City. Over the course of her book, Lawson builds a credible, detailed argument for the serious study of resistance to Prohibition.

Lawson's primary contribution is her use of the Coast Guard Seized Vessel Records from 1920 to 1933 to reconstruct the stories of the vast army (perhaps navy would be a more accurate term) of liquor smugglers. Comprised of ninety archival boxes of files organized by the names of seized vessels, the records remained confidential until the 1990s. In them, Lawson finds detailed information on 250 captured rum-running vessels that ferried booze from Canadian, European, and Caribbean supply ships anchored on "Rum Row" to Long Island, New Jersey, Staten Island, Brooklyn, and directly to Manhattan. While the United States had convinced Canada and Great Britain to extend the legal limit of U.S. territory to twelve miles offshore in 1924, this extension clearly did little to limit the supply of rum, whiskey, and vodka. The floating warehouses supplied every taste. Lawson relays captivating stories of the cat-and-mouse games played by rum-running captains and the Coast Guard, with healthy doses of pirates, gangs, and innovative new technologies—radios, planes, and submarines. She resurrects several characters worthy of their own episodic television series, including Gertrude Lythgoe, the "Queen of Rum Row."

Lawson's discussion of bootleggers yields fewer revelations than her work on smugglers. However, she makes a compelling argument about the process through which Prohibition spurred the development of organized crime in America. Essentially, three large, ethnically distinct liquor-smuggling groups grew out of gangs on the Lower East Side, the West Side, and Little Italy. These newly rich and sophisticated syndicates then diverted legally produced liquor, together with smuggled liquor from Rum Row and homemade concoctions, to nightclubs, speakeasies, and other popular drinking

1. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 289.

spots. Jewish, Irish, and Italian mobsters ran the trade, and ensured a steady supply of both liquor and violence.

In the final section of her book, Lawson shifts from supply to demand. She writes dramatically of the 500 nightclubs and 30,000 speakeasies that comprised America's largest liquor market. Once again, there is no shortage of colorful characters, like Don Dickerman, whose Pirate's Den on Minetta Lane featured waitresses dressed as pirates, a talking parrot, and re-enactments of Treasure Island by the staff. Lawson also makes tangible the density of clubs. On one block of West 52nd Street alone, thirsty patrons could find Jean Billiams, Club 21, The Onyx, the Dizzy Club, and thirty-five other establishments. There were clubs for everyone from opera patrons to construction crews, and in every neighborhood from the Bowery up to Harlem.

The book's summary is an interesting attempt to link smugglers, bootleggers, and scofflaws to broader American resistance movements, including the defense of the First Amendment, the tradition of smuggling, and the growing respect for diversity. With this final connection, Lawson brings us back to Hofstadter and the rural/urban conflict he saw as the root of so much tension and so much progress and reform. While the stories of swashbuckling smugglers and gangs of hoodlums make great fodder for popular entertainment, Lawson does a fine job of reconnecting their exploits to the longer and continuing narrative of popular resistance as a prominent feature of American life.

Timothy Houlihan, *St. Francis College*