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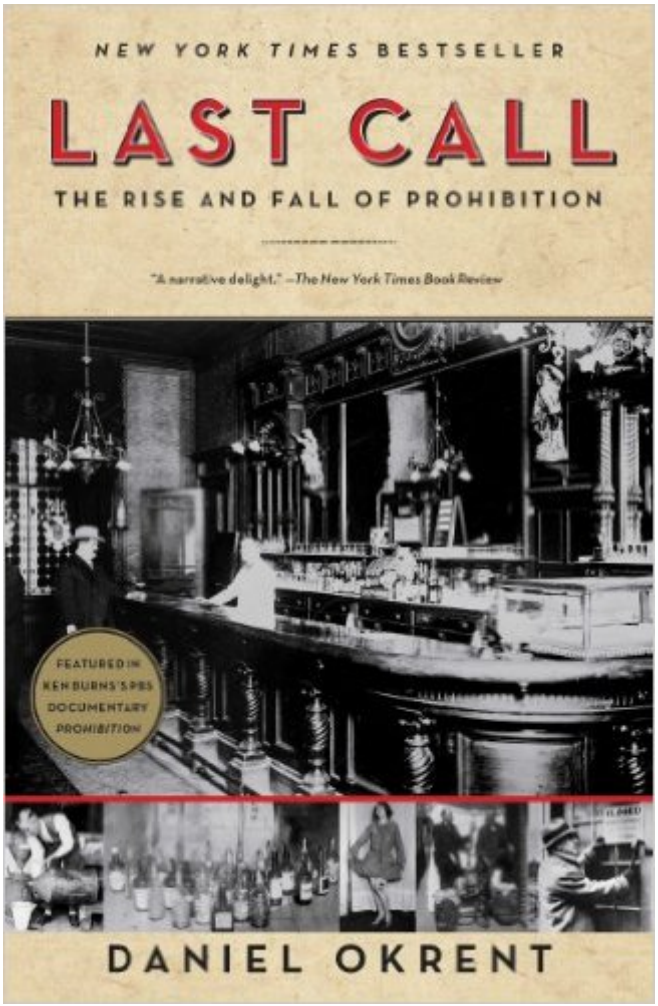
Last Call: The Rise And Fall Of Prohibition



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Synopsis

A brilliant, authoritative, and fascinating history of Americaâ ™s most puzzling era, the years 1920 to 1933, when the US Constitution was amended to restrict one of Americaâ ™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 Okrentâ ™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 womenâ ™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 incredibleâ ”if long-forgottenâ ”federal official Mabel Walker Willebrandt, who throughout the twenties was the most powerful woman in the country. (Perhaps most surprising of all is Okrentâ ™s account of Joseph P. Kennedyâ ™s legendary, and long-misunderstood, role in the liquor business.) Itâ ™s a book rich with stories from nearly all parts of the country. Okrentâ ™s narrative runs through smoky Manhattan speakeasies, where relations between the sexes were changed forever; California vineyards busily producing â œsacramentalâ • 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 Okrentâ ™s rank as a major American writer.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is an all-encompassing view of what lead up to the creation of the 18th ammendment(and its earliest roots which went back pretty far in american history) and its eventual downfall and lightening fast repeal.I chose this book as a Vine selection because it sounded as though it went beyond the common perception of bathtub gin, speakeasies, and G-men in a Warner Bros. movie smashing trucks full of beer kegs. In fact, it did go way beyond that. Daniel Okrent’s book is a lively source of all things Prohibition. He provides a rather in-depth history of how special interest groups such as the KKK and church groups and people such as Billy Sunday, Wayne Wheeler and Carrie Nation banded together to popularize the idea of prohibition and how the concept picked up steam politically via lobbying to enforce a law nationally that the public at large really didn’t support. The book discusses the key players nationally who supported and also opposed this bill and provided background material/biographies of these people. The implementation of the bill as well as the go-arounds such as bootleg booze and speakeasies are discussed, and the reader is supplied with information regarding how this stuff (some of which proving quite toxic) was made. Also discussed is the general public disatisfaction with the bill and the reasons for its rapid decline/downfall in depression-era America.One of the things I particularly liked (and possibly even loved) were some of the unexpected little gems such as the way alcoholic beverages were marketed to a pre-prohibition public, the background information on some of the beer barons and distillers and how they rode out the ’dry’ spell. Of particular interest was the way in which the ordinary lives of the american people were changed.

Prohibition was the best of intentions; it was the worst of results. A burning passion to cure the world of intoxication begat a wildfire of unintended consequences that permanently changed the American

political landscape like no event since the civil war. The 18th Amendment to the Constitution--the first to curtail rather than to protect liberty--was imposed in a bipartisan political landslide of moral fervor led by fiery evangelicals bent on saving Americans from Demon Rum: an idea that had gathered 60 years of steam & brimstone, and whose time had finally come. Prohibition also created powerful new constituencies that profited from its continuance. Even its detractors became hopelessly resigned to its permanence.It was not a revolution made led by dull people. The morally excited are, for all their dryness (pun intended), more animated, more colorful than the skeptical or the wise. Here the dramatis personnae of this tragicomedy seem more than merely memorable, they come to life on the page. But even in the limelight of the author's wit, prohibitionists don't seem caricatured, uneducated or stupid. (How could they have known? The lessons of hindsight were waiting offstage.) The complex tale of their successful constitutional coup is chronicled here in far more complex depth and detail than you might expect, yet the narrative flows quickly among the actors and events without losing momentum. The avalanche of startling facts and grotesque statistics are leavened with enough really good writing to yield laugh-out-loud descriptions, outrageous quotes and incisive commentary. Along with familiar folks like Rev. Billy Sunday, Carrie Nation, Andrew Volstead, et.al.

Daniel Okrent has written an entertaining and thorough history of Prohibition, starting with the political and social organizations of the late 19th century whose decades of lobbying and gradually refined lobbying techniques resulted in the passing of the 18th Amendment. He then discusses how citizens (nearly universally) ignored the law, how bootleggers produced alcohol and brought it to market, how the government responded, and how very rapidly it came to an end once the Great Depression started.Though this time period is often featured in fiction and in movies, I found myself repeatedly surprised at how little of this story I already knew. The mutual dependence of the Prohibition movement and Women's suffrage, for example, or the effective nullification of Prohibition by the very Congress that had passed it, as they never allocated money for enforcement. Okrent also has a good sense for amusing anecdote, especially about the larger-than-life characters who violated the law once it was in place (including many members of Congress and of every presidential administration from 1919 to 1933).The most interesting material in the book, I think, is the discussion of the various *legal* ways that alcohol was produced in the United States or shipped here under prohibition. Demand for drink was so strong that even small loopholes in the law were torn open. "Medicinal" alcohol, "sacramental" wine, even home brewing kits became massive industries.Between the engaging writing and the Ken Burns documentary to come, it is inevitable

that this book will be widely read. As the story of Prohibition sheds light on modern pressure group politics, drug legalization, and fluidity of political alliances, America will be better for having read it.

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