

Recalling the Birth of Alcohol Science

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OCTOBER 1998 marks the 60th anniversary of a significant event in the history of alcohol problems in the United States—namely, the launching of a major initiative arguing that science, per se, rather than the political process should be given charge of this longstanding American social issue. A news conference to that end was copresented by American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) permanent secretary, Forest R. Moulton, and New York's Bellevue Hospital psychiatrist, Karl M. Bowman, in the autumn of 1938—an account of which was published in *Science* (Reports, 1938). A glance at the newly formed Research Council on Problems of Alcohol's membership roster of that time shows that it included some of the day's leading scientific figures: for example, physiologist Walter B. Cannon, biologist Edwin G. Conklin, Bell Labs president Frank B. Jewett, Science Press editor J. McKeen Cattell, astronomer Harlow Shapley, physicist Arthur H. Compton, neurologist Foster Kennedy and economist Wesley C. Mitchell.

What accounted for the assembly of such a heavy-hitting scientific batting order on behalf of new scientific "ownership" of the nation's nettlesome relationship to alcohol? Repeal of Prohibition (December 1933) was not yet 5 years old, and already there were stirrings of a new Dry counterattack. One hotly debated alcohol issue concerned what school-children should be told or taught about alcohol in the nation's public schools in the new post-repeal era. There was widespread ambivalence about reintroducing the bone-Dry pedagogy that had gained dominance since the 1870s and 1880s largely through the efforts of WCTU advocate Mary L. Hunt. Many states formed educational commissions to reevaluate and reconstitute their alcohol-related pedagogic fare and, not surprisingly, these turned to mainstream contemporary science (as opposed to an earlier tradition of "temperance science") for new content.

In Virginia, two pharmacology professors, J.A. Waddell and H. B. Haag, completed a scientific report and were in the process of submitting it to the state legislature in early 1938. When word leaked to the press that their report suggested that moderate alcohol consumption was not harmful to the human organism, the state's network of Dry organizations flooded the legislature with petitions and letters voicing

howls of protest. So strong was the public reaction that the state legislature voted to have all 1,000 copies of the new report burned—unread!—in the furnace of the state capitol building, which decision was duly carried out on April 16, 1938, with the building's fire marshal looking on. The event was not front-page news in the wider national press, but it helped spark scientific observers to mount the counter-initiative reflected in the Research Council on Problems of Alcohol (RCPA). Like Tennessee's famous Scopes Trial in 1925, defeat at the hands of public opinion rallied contemporary scientists to safeguard the place of modern science in the nation's educational establishment.

There were other sources for the RCPA's formation, too. The Great Depression was not yet over and AAAS permanent secretary Moulton looked to the alcohol issue as prime territory both for expanding depression-contracted scientific employment and for rehabilitating science's tarnished public image. Many citizens had gravitated to the view that new, labor-saving technology—generated by scientific advances in the 1920s—was largely responsible for the depression's massive unemployment. Moulton had launched a "Science & Society" movement to counter this viewpoint, arguing that science and scientists cared about society and the effects of technological progress, and that scientists were even useful in solving social problems. The alcohol issue appeared to fit nicely into Moulton's society-serving and science-showcasing agenda.

In due course the alcohol problems initiative became perhaps the most successful institutional exemplar of Moulton's "Science & Society" enterprise, which reached an institutional culmination in 1970 with the formation of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (now in the NIH family). And, although there is still a lot to learn and not everyone agrees about the level of success science has enjoyed in instructing the nation's conception or response to this social problems arena, the importance of science in relation to alcohol-related questions has become a commonplace in American life. The seed for the research establishment that has blossomed over the intervening years was planted 60 years ago.

Reference

Reports: The Research Council on Problems of Alcohol. *Science* **88**: 329-332, 1938.

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