Every Home a Distillery: Alcohol, Gender, and Technology in the Colonial Chesapeake
Sarah Hand Meacham
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It is a great pleasure when one comes across a brilli- ant interpretation of primary sources. Sarah Hand Meacham, who teaches early American history at Virginia Commonwealth University, tells a most fascinating and unique story in Every Home a Distillery: Alcohol, Gender, and Technology in the Colonial Chesapeake. Meacham’s treatise examines how people of the remote Chesapeake region, “the increasingly settled portions of Virginia and Maryland that touched the Chesapeake Bay and its rivers” (p.1), acquired their alcoholic beverages. At the same time Every Home a Distillery provides an excellent example of how to use and interpret scanty primary source material.

Meacham traces the history of alcohol production in the Chesapeake through the lens of gender. In doing so she analyzes the profound shifts that occurred in Chesapeake society between 1690 and 1800 due to increased interest in science and technology, the impact of the American Revolution, and the introduction of tea and coffee. Chapter topics include a general examination of the importance of alcohol, the gendered process of cidering, the seasonal and technical problems of acquiring alcohol, the tavernkeeping trade in colonial Virginia, markets and the purchasing of alcohol after the 1750s, men’s increasing role in alcohol production, and the problems of alcohol consumption and the swing to temperance.

Traditionally, English women produced alcoholic beverages for their households, chiefly cider but also other drinks such as quince and gooseberry wine. By the eighteenth century English women were no longer the sole providers of alcohol for their households. But in the isolated Chesapeake area, Meacham found a story very different from that of England and New England of the eighteenth century. Women in the Chesapeake region continued to produce alcoholic beverages until the middle of the eighteenth century.

People of that time drank alcohol throughout the day, starting at breakfast with bread and ale or cider. Both men and women, including slaves, imbibed copious amounts. Much of Meacham’s discussion surrounds the challenges facing large and middling tobacco planters in providing alcohol all year round. Drought, pigs gobbling up dropped fruit, lack of markets, and unpredictability of shipments from England contributed to the planters’ constant hardship in providing alcohol for their families and households.

Testifying to the importance of cookbooks as primary source material, Meacham includes recipes and commentary on producing alcoholic beverages culled from period cookbooks. She emphasizes repeatedly the value of cookbooks in culinary and food history, even though most women were illiterate and innumerate.

Meacham documents the shift from alcoholic beverage recipes found in women’s cookbooks to men’s books on husbantry and distilling, signifying the transfer of the task of making alcohol from women to men. Distilling allowed planters to preserve their fruit for far longer, in the form of brandy. Like cidering, distilling offered large planters tremendous economic advantages, for they possessed the slave labor and materials to produce large quantities of alcohol. In statements that are undocumented, due to the lack of women’s words on the subject (pp.119 and 156–157), Meacham concludes that women may well have been happy about this change, since making alcohol never afforded them any extra status, just more work. Meacham also found herself handicapped by the lack of source material on the alcohol-related experiences of African American slaves.

Meacham’s concluding essay on her sources is very useful, arranged as it is by major topics and not a mere list of references. A list of references would, however, be helpful in quickly determining whether or not Meacham had consulted certain sources. The index demonstrates thoughtful analysis of the text and provides readers with access to most of the major and minor points brought out in Every Home a Distillery, although some names are missing, like “May, Robert.” It is also interesting that Meacham does not mention the excise tax on home-distilled whiskey levied during George Washington’s presidency. Often the academic tone detracts from the flow of the narrative, but, overall, the text invites the reader to settle down in a plush easy chair for an informative afternoon of reading.

While monographs like Gina Hames’s broad Alcohol in World History (2009), Frederick Smith’s Archaeology of Alcohol and Drinking (2008, reviewed in Gastronomica, Fall 2008), and Sharon V. Salinger’s Taverns and Drinking in Early America (2002) consider alcohol consumption through history and in early America, Sarah Hand Meacham’s important Every Home a Distillery offers a penetrating look at how people produced and acquired alcohol in the Chesapeake, the microcosm that greatly influenced the creation of the United States.

—Cynthia D. Bertelsen, Blacksburg, VA