

A History of the World in 6 Glasses

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Throughout human history, certain drinks have done much more than just quench thirst. As Tom Standage relates with authority and charm, six of them have had a surprisingly pervasive influence on the course of history, becoming the defining drink during a pivotal historical period.

A History of the World in 6 Glasses tells the story of humanity from the Stone Age to the 21st century through the lens of beer, wine, spirits, coffee, tea, and cola. Beer was first made in the Fertile Crescent and by 3000 B.C.E. was so important to Mesopotamia and Egypt that it was used to pay wages. In ancient Greece wine became the main export of her vast seaborne trade, helping spread Greek culture abroad. Spirits such as brandy and rum fueled the Age of Exploration, fortifying seamen on long voyages and oiling the pernicious slave trade. Although coffee originated in the Arab world, it stoked revolutionary thought in Europe during the Age of Reason, when coffeehouses became centers of intellectual exchange. And hundreds of years after the Chinese began drinking tea, it became especially popular in Britain, with far-reaching effects on British foreign policy. Finally, though carbonated drinks were invented in 18th-century Europe they became a 20th-century phenomenon, and Coca-Cola in particular is the leading symbol of globalization.

For Tom Standage, each drink is a kind of technology, a catalyst for advancing culture by which he demonstrates the intricate interplay of different civilizations. You may never look at your favorite drink the same way again.

A History of the World in 6 Glasses Details


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From Reader Review A History of the World in 6 Glasses for online ebook

Margitte says

I noticed this book on a few friend's 'to-read' lists and thought I should write a review on it since I have read it a few years back and it is still very much part of our family's proud ...intellectual history...8-)

We do not realize how necessary fluids are for our survival. As Tom Standage states, we can live without food for quite a while, but will die very soon of fluid deprivation. In fact, aren't we looking for water on Mars before we migrate there? :-))

Initially I did not plan to buy this book. I was trying to find "The Devil's Cup: A History of the World According to Coffee" by Stewart Lee Allen.

Tom Standage divided the history of the world into six periods, each forming a different chapter in the book: Beer in Mesopotamia and Egypt; Wine in Greece and Rome; Spirits in the Colonial Period; Coffee in the Age of Reason; Tea and the British empire; Coca-Cola and the Rise of America. Three are alcohol beverages and three caffeine.

The idea for the book came to Tom Standage *'while reading an article in my Sunday newspaper about a wine said to have been one of Napoleon's favourites during exile: Vin de Constance. It is a sweet wine, made in the Constantia region of South Africa, which was popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. In Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility, the heroine is advised to drink it because of its 'healing powers on a disappointed heart'. Charles Dickens also mentions the wine, referring in The Mystery of Edwin Drood to 'the support embodied in a glass of Constantia and a home-made biscuit'.*

There is perhaps a more subtle, unintentional, humor buried in the amazing facts, and the reader needs to concentrate. It can cramp the reader's style a bit on the think-tank. So much so that I personally often fell asleep and had to reread everything in a new session, which made it tedious in some instances. But the facts are worth learning!

It certainly sheds a bright new light on world history. The book is so laden with information that I found it too much to absorb in one sitting. For instance: the ancient old tea culture of the Chinese which was only discovered hundreds of years later by the Brits, changed the latter's foreign policy forever; brandy and rum, developed from the Arabian knowledge of chemistry, inspired the age of Exploration; Greeks spread their influence through their exports of wine all over the world.

The book encourage thought. Slavery, wars and sanctions were often fueled by some of these beverages. Reading it all in one book, from Tom Standage's perspective, turns these facts into eye-openers.

For instance: P 80:

"...herbs, honey and other additives were commonly added to lesser wines to conceal imperfections. Some Romans even carried herbs and other flavorings with them while traveling, to improve the taste of bad wine.

While modern wine drinkers may turn up their noses at the Greek and Roman use of additives,

it is not that different from the modern use of oak as flavoring agent, often to make otherwise unremarkable wines more palatable.

Below these adulterated wines was *posca*, a drink made by mixing water with wine that had turned sour and vinegarlike. *Posca* was commonly issued to Roman soldiers when better wines were unavailable, for example, during long campaigns. It was, in effect, a form of portable water-purification technology for the Roman army. When a Roman soldier offered Jesus Christ a sponge dipped in wine during his crucifixion, the wine in question would have been *posca*."

The location where you read the book does not matter. What is more important is that the information shared in the book ensures long relaxing discussion on a Sunday afternoon with friends and family. It gives some mundane moments the more meaningful memories it needs.

I initially gave it three stars only because it was not an easy read. I really needed to keep all my ducks in a row for this one. But in retrospect I changed my mind. His research was excellent!

It is a good read for someone who wants to know how the development of chemistry from ancient times until now changed our world - in an easy, non-scientific, but factual read.

It is the only book I offer to guest to take to bed with them!

Jonathan says

6 Glasses zeroes in on six liquids--from beer in ancient Mesopotamia to wine and spirits to coffee and tea and finally to cola and the globalization of brands such as Pepsi and Coca-Cola--and targets each as being responsible (or at least culpable) for the shaping of cultures (quite likely), writing itself (quite possible), and industrialization (believable, especially in light of Coke).

Each of the libations receives its proper dues. The organization of the book itself is very well done, and the anecdotes and histories of each are engaging.

The sad irony about 6 Glasses--and it's a rather important one--is that, for all its talk, the book is remarkably dry. Sure, Standage gets wittier than in the opening section on beer, and notably in the chapters on wine and cola, which seem his obvious liquids of choice, but this reader's reserves were nearly sapped after finishing the pages about beer.

He does a bang-up job with his research and presentation in some parts of this book, frames his passages well, and, honestly, the pictures really do help.

"Quickly, bring me a beaker of wine, so that I may wet my mind and say something clever," Aristophanes reports to us as the section on wine commences. One wishes that Standage had called for just that. Perhaps it would have made for a more intriguing read.

Jim says

An interesting way of breaking history up by beer, wine, whiskey, coffee, tea, & cola. Each came into its own in our history & may well have driven it in some ways. The basic idea along with a thumbnail of each is laid out in the introduction pretty well. Well enough that I didn't want to continue listening after about half the first section on beer. I didn't care much for the narrator & that wasn't helped by repetitious writing. This would probably be a great book to read, though.

It's doubtful, but I might get back to it at some point.

Starry says

I saw this in my sister's to-read list and, boy, am I glad! This was a really fun book to read. For me.

It was not so fun for my husband, who was stuck sitting next to me and hearing, "Hey, listen to this --" and "Here's something interesting --". But now I'm done, so he can read all the little leftover bits where I managed to hold my tongue and let him enjoy his own book (which probably wasn't half so interesting).

The book attempts to tell the history of the world using six beverages that illustrate the social and political doings of the day: beer (the cultivation of grains), wine (rise of Greek and Roman culture), distilled liquor (sea travel and colonialism), coffee (Age of Reason), tea (British Empire), and Coca-Cola (rise of capitalism, American power and influence). It's a clever way to tell a story.

Although history is told from the typical Euro-centric viewpoint in this book, the beverages and their backstories have impressively global origins: coffee originally from Arabia, tea from Asia, the cocoa and kola from South America and Africa. And some of ingredients' stories, told partly and in passing, would also be very interesting on their own: sugarcane and chocolate, for instance.

Praxedes says

It is possible to view history through almost any lens...in this case the author chose drinks to tell a story of the world's development. Filled with interesting facts and carefully researched, the author deftly recounts human/political/religious events from the perspective of six different drinks. Interestingly, half of them contain no alcohol!

I would have rated it higher were it not for the sometimes confusing prose. Transitional phrases from one subtopic to the next did not have the flow needed to cover such an enormous time span seamlessly. But I would definitely recommend it.

Andy says

Pop non-fiction with clever gimmick of six beverages to summarize world history. Plenty of interesting factoids.

One problem is that the flip side of the cleverness of the gimmick is that all sorts of beverages are left out. The human consumption of animal milk, for example, is an interesting story with important implications but we don't learn about that.

Another problem is that the research does not appear to be very deep and so some of the factoids don't seem to be true. For example, tea is credited with protecting the English from bacterial disease around the time of the industrial revolution. But that is when mortality was the highest overall, and if one looks at specific outbreaks like the great cholera epidemic of John Snow fame, it was specifically the beer drinkers who were spared. It makes some theoretical sense that tea should be helpful but that's different from there being any actual evidence of that.

The book edges beyond cocktail-party chatter to serious stuff at the end in a polemic about water.

Xxertz says

It is funny how we prefer certain aspects of books. Another review here enjoyed the non-alcoholic drinks better than the alcoholic drinks due to the amount of history and economics it covered, but I found the alcohol drinks to be far more interesting, in depth, and entertaining. Overall, I liked this book and learned a lot about how these drinks affected trade and became popular worldwide.

Domenico says

I seem to be in a phase where I like books that show me the hidden life of the everyday things all around us, especially food and drink. A few years ago I read "Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany", by Bill Buford, which started me on this quest, which was followed by several more books, including "The Omnivore's Dilemma", by Michael Pollan. Most recently I read "The Search for God and Guinness", by Stephen Mansfield.

Now, I've finished "A History of the World in 6 Glasses", by Tom Standage, which connects the span of human history to 6 different beverages that affected history culturally, politically, anthropologically, nutritionally, and economically. The six, in rough order of their era of greatest influence, are beer, wine, whiskey, coffee, tea, and cola. More broadly, you could have called the book "A History of the World in Two Brain-Altering Chemicals: Alcohol and Caffeine."

It is a fascinating look at how these drinks sometimes have been responsible for pivotal moments in history, causing one civilization to rise and another to fall. While human affairs are much more complicated than one factor can explain, we can't deny that one of the reasons ancient tribes turned from peripatetic hunting-gathering to more stationary agriculture was the need to cultivate grains for beer, for instance. (Standage points out that of course the grains were also used for bread too, but bread and beer were nearly interchangeable in most places, two phases of cooking of the same product. Beer was "liquid bread" and

bread was "solid beer.")

Most the drinks had origins--or at least early primary uses--in religious rituals, especially beer, wine, coffee, and tea. Whiskey and cola, which were much more modern inventions were just consumer products. Eventually, all of them made the leap to common use. What made them significant was their eventual ubiquity, even if at first they were reserved to the elites.

There were also some very interesting anecdotes, such as the story of how coffee came to Europe from the Middle East. Some theologians rejected it as a Muslim invention, thus of the devil, while others embraced. So a decision had to be made.

Shortly before his death in 1605, Pope Clement VIII was asked to state the Catholic church's position on coffee. At the time, the drink was a novelty little known in Europe except among botanists and medical men, including those at the University of Padua, a leading center for medical research. Coffee's religious opponents argued that coffee was evil: They contended that since Muslims were unable to drink wine, the holy drink of Christians, the devil had punished them with coffee instead. But the pope had the final say. A Venetian merchant provided a small sample for inspection, and Clement decided to taste the new drink before making his decision. The story goes that he was so enchanted by its taste and aroma that he approved its consumption by Christians.

Other sources claim he said: "This devil's drink is so delicious...we should cheat the devil by baptizing it." True or not, I will be sure to thank Pope Clement VIII and pray for him every day over my morning cup of joe.

Another interesting tidbit concerned the importance of tea to the Industrial Revolution in Britain in the 18th and 19th century. As labor became less about individual craftsmen and more about unskilled workers who could maintain machines in monotonous repetition over long hours, tea and tea breaks helped them to remain alert and concentrate. Likewise, even as the factory workers were gathering together in closer working and living conditions, waterborne illnesses became almost extinct, not just due to the boiling of water for tea, but for the phenolic acids--the tannins--in the tea itself.

Infants benefited too, since the antibacterial phenolics in tea pass easily into the breast milk of nursing mothers. This lowered infant mortality and provided a large labor pool just as the Industrial Revolution took hold.

In fact, every one of the six drinks was considered for both their positive and negative effects on society. Coffee led to 16th-century coffeehouses that were the locus of the Scientific Revolution that led to the Enlightenment, democracy, free-market economics, and more. The Chinese stranglehold on tea production and insistence on Westerners buying it with silver, not trading it for Western goods, led to the creation of the opium trade from India that eventually destabilized China in the 19th century, which last through the 20th century until the rise of Communism.

While these six beverages can't be said to have caused the most important and decisive moments of history,

they often played significant roles in moments that caused the course of history to go in one direction and not the other. If not for the wine it exported, would Greece have risen to a great culture that brought us philosophy and so much else? Without tea or rum/whiskey, would Great Britain have become the empire on whose flag the sun never sets? Maybe, maybe in a different form or in a different time, but undoubtedly different.

"A History of the World in Six Glasses" was a fun and quick read that makes me want to delve more into the various individual elements it presents. Which is the best kind of book, isn't it?

Max says

First off, let me just say that if the concept of this book interests you, by all means you should read it. It's light and breezy, and you stand to lose very little by taking the time. However, I have to say that my feelings about this book are very conflicted. In terms of quality, the book is clearly delineated into two halves: the half discussing alcoholic drinks, and the half discussing caffeinated drinks. Throughout the first portion of the book, which focuses on beer, wine, and spirits, I was a bit bored, and found myself becoming frustrated at how repetitive Standage's writing could be. It seemed like there just wasn't enough substance to back up Standage's claims of how dramatically these beverages had impacted human history, and the facts and arguments he did provide were often repeated in subtly different ways throughout a given section. I was still interested in the material of this half of the book, I just didn't find it particularly compelling. The second half, by contrast, really delivered on the promise of the book's thesis, and it's pretty obvious why. Standage is an editor for The Economist, and it's clear reading this book that economics is what he feels most comfortable writing about. His discussions of the impacts of the British tea trade, in particular, were extremely interesting. Indeed, Standage finds it difficult to conceal his British biases, as the most in-depth and interesting parts of this book exclusively discuss British culture. The only thing that detracted from my enjoyment of the second half of this book was the way that Standage's own personal socioeconomic views seeped into the section on Coca-Cola, so that by the end it started reading like a pro-free-trade pamphlet. It's nothing that some good editing couldn't have fixed, and it left a bit of a sour taste in my mouth (ha, ha) as I finished the book. Still, overall, well worth the read, and it's certainly made me curious about a lot of aspects of history that I'd never even contemplated before.

Christian Kitchen says

Whoever the marketing guy was behind Erik Larson's "The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America," he was a genius. Because honestly, I don't really want to read a 447 page history of the Chicago World's Fair--and I'm guessing, neither do you. But, if you were hoodwinked into believing (as I was) that Larson's opus was an inspired bit of comparison between the architect of the 1893 World's Fair and a diabolically brilliant psychopath and kept reading because you were waiting for the numerous opportunities Larson had to make this happen and then realized somewhere about two-thirds of the way through that he had perhaps added the bit about the serial killer because he realized that no one would probably read the book if it didn't have some sort of hook and then you noticed that Larson sort of pulled it off anyway and (just bear with me one more moment here) you realized years later that the passages you most remember in the book were these tremendously well crafted passages about the World's Fair itself juxtaposed with a noirish filth ridden Chicago, you might, like I did tonight, come to forgive the misrepresentation and accept the book as a rather brilliant historical narrative. So, thanks guy

who wrote the jacket copy for Larson because you totally made me read the book and just like I lie to my son and tell him that spinach is pesto because he'll eat pesto, you lied to me and I was the better for it.

As for you Tom Standage, or whoever allowed you to waste as brilliant an idea as this, fuck you, and I think you need to take the excellent idea that could have been this book and put it back in the pool because you straight messed it up. Seriously, I want a full rewrite with a different author because I don't know how you take so tremendously focused an idea as tracing world civilization through its dominant beverages (beverages mind you that I have a close and deeply personal relationship with) and turn it into the kind of prose that I'm more familiar with from middle school history textbooks. You offered me a nicely aged single malt but what I got was a half pint of Borden chocolate milk with the seam that smells like the lunch lady.

That said--for keeping it brief and managing to remind me how good historical nonfiction can be when written by other authors--I applaud you. (1.5/5)

Stefan Burrell says

This book, I've read twice. It takes you from the formation of beer and society in Mesopotamia, to the use of wine as currency and how wine types represented a social classification system in Greece and Rome. It went through spirits and colonial time: We only have whiskey because it took too long to ship scotch and brandy by wagon out west, so we made corn whiskey. To how coffee was at first banned in Muslim society and called black wine - till they figured that it caused a different state of mind than actual alcohol. To the use of tea as a way to stay hydrated in England, the city was packed full and the water was not the cleanest. Once coffee arrived in England, there were coffee houses for men only because they were a place to smoke and talk politics while drinking coffee. Women in England had tea gardens, nice gardens where they could walk, talk or sit and drink tea. The book wrapped up in the time of just after WWII, granting Coca-Cola responsible as the first company to be globalized. The factories were built in American forts during the war so that the soldier could have coca-cola to drink, when WWII was over the factories remained. Then it dipped a bit to the Cold War as Coke played around with Invisible Coke and then landed at being Coca-Cola Classic, the original recipe minus the cocaine.

Masood says

It is a very informative, well-written book that could attract a wide range of readers who like the story of civilization and its heritages. The last clause of the book's epilogue was very interesting for me and give me a good mode after turning the last page of the book:

"When you next raise some beer, wine, spirits, coffee, tea, or Coca-Cola to your lips, think about how it reached you across space and time, and remember that it contains more than mere alcohol or caffeine. There is history, too, amid its swirling depths."

Casey says

This book should really be called "A History of the Western World in 6 Glasses," as it doesn't consider the drinks of South America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and much of Asia. Indeed, tea is considered only through the lens of the British empire, even though the formal Japanese tea service is arguably more

interesting than a British tea party. Even as a Western history, it kind of fails, as there's a large gap between wine production in the Roman empire and the distillation of rum in Barbados. This can only be viewed as a surface history of the world, but as far as surface stories go, it's pretty interesting.

Throughout the book, Standage tells the history of six beverages (beer, wine, spirits, coffee, tea, and Coca-Cola) as they appeared in the historical record. This is actually not so great, as the book ends up talking about beer without ever mentioning Germany, and wine without ever mentioning France or California. Instead of bringing it all back together in the epilogue, he just rambles on about bottled water and (randomly) colonizing Mars.

The book also contains a shockingly uncritical depiction of the Coca-Cola company, which creates a "beverage" that can best be described as a noxious substance that no one should be consuming, especially not on a regular basis. Unfortunately, the health effects of soda are not discussed.

I'd recommend *A History of the World in 6 Glasses* only to those interested in culinary history and esoterica. History buffs and general readers should skip this one.

SpookySoto says

This was a great book. If you're interested in history and beverages I highly recommend it to you.

It explores world history from the point of view of the discovery and consumption of several key beverages: beer, wine, rum, coffee, tea and cola.

I learned a lot. My favorite chapters were the ones about coffee.

I recommend it, specially in audiobook format.

Yazdan says

[illegible]