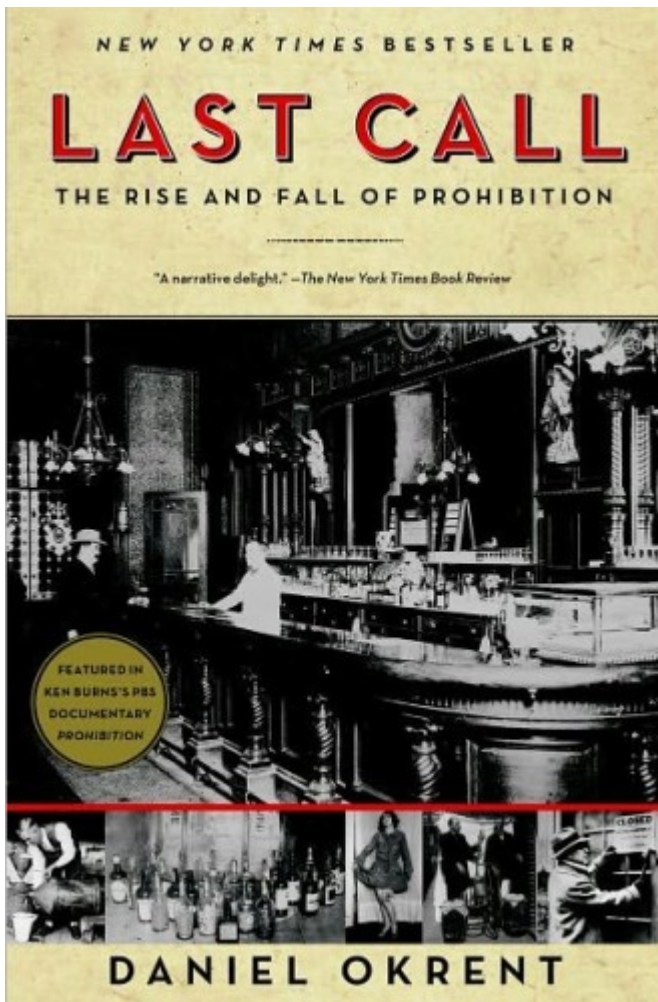


Dry country

by [Anne Blue Wills](#) in the [September 6, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Last Call

By Daniel Okrent
Scribner

If ever the phrase "unintended consequences" applied to a situation, it does to the epic story of the 18th Amendment, added to the U.S. Constitution in 1919, and its

undoing by the 21st Amendment 14 years later. Prohibition of the "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors," enshrined in law as the Volstead Act, did initially suppress alcohol consumption in the U.S., but almost immediately it also produced a flourishing black market, organized crime and disorganized politics.

Twentieth-century Prohibition grew from the efforts of the Anti-Saloon League, "the mightiest pressure group in the nation's history." Women such as "Mother" Eliza Thompson, Frances Willard, Mary Hanchett Hunt and the hatchet-wielding Carrie Nation dominated post-Civil War liquor reform. But the Anti-Saloon League, founded in 1893 by Oberlin alumnus and Congregational minister Howard Hyde Russell, led an odd coalition of southern Democrats, suffragists, progressives and industrialists with merciless effectiveness. Its slogan: "The Church in Action Against the Saloon."

The Anti-Saloon League began its campaign for an amendment in November 1913. Time was of the essence: congressional districts would be reapportioned after the 1920 census, with representatives from booming cities (home to the immigrant populations that Prohibitionists feared) taking over formerly rural, presumably dry seats. The league and its allies therefore spent the years before 1919 working vigorously both to defeat wets and to get dry laws on the books in dozens of states. League forces also determined the strict language of the 18th Amendment.

Daniel Okrent rightly credits the Anti-Saloon League with engineering the passage of the first constitutional amendment to address individual Americans' private behavior. In one of several places where Okrent seems to misunderstand the U.S. religious landscape, however, he describes the league as mobilizing "the nation's literalist Protestant churches and their congregations." A coalition of mainly Methodist and Baptist churches at the turn of the century cannot be accurately characterized by the word *literalist*, not only because the divisions between biblical inerrantists and modernists had not yet hardened, but also because a literalist reading of the Bible's views on drinking alcohol is impossible.

Likewise, Okrent calls Prohibition campaigner William Jennings Bryan a "Faith-Based Liberal." The label might give contemporary readers some idea of where Bryan stood, but it would be an incomplete if not incorrect idea since Bryan's progressivism grew precisely out of his biblical traditionalism. Another token of Okrent's difficulties with meaningfully sorting out these Protestant activists is his likening of Wayne Wheeler, the chief engine of the Anti-Saloon League, to the risible Ned Flanders of television's *The Simpsons*.

The second part of Okrent's book, titled "The Flood," details Americans' numerous creative evasions of the alcohol ban, demonstrating one of the era's ironies: "Prohibition was better than no liquor at all." Cagney drinkers—and wily businesspeople—exploited the exceptions for domestic, religious and medicinal use of alcohol. Okrent revels in sharing the details of how famous brands originated in such circumstances. Mondavi Vineyards, Beaulieu Vineyard and Seagram's all started by squeezing through legal loopholes. Charles Walgreen, who sold liquor along with soda fountain offerings, did not build a drugstore empire on milkshakes alone. Robert Wood Johnson II, of today's "family company," used to patronize the rumrunners off the Jersey coast for evening drinks.

Readers will also learn the origins and mechanics of speakeasies, cocktail parties, soft-drink production, oceangoing cruises, mixed-race clubs and cigarette boats. Powder rooms and table service evolved because of women's presence on the public drinking scene; a woman could frequent a speakeasy and maintain her reputation as long as she did not lollygag at the bar. Other changes resonated politically: Prohibition led to the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, the now-customary seven-year clock for amendment ratification, and legal wiretapping.

Unfortunately—because it ends up mocking the sincerity of many who worked in good faith for Prohibition's passage—Okrent's glib tone intensifies in this section of the book. He emphasizes the misguided efforts of racists, nativists and retrograde religionists to the exclusion of social welfare concerns. Sloppy enforcement and wild evasions played havoc with the Prohibitionists' intentions, and this circumstance makes the Prohibitionists downright laughable to Okrent. Does he want to say that prohibition of any kind is never good social policy? One can make that argument, but more adroitly than this.

How did Prohibition finally come apart? By 1924, Congress included a "vocal wet caucus," including Representative Fiorello La Guardia of New York. Congressional hearings in 1926 focused in part on the rise of organized crime. The dries did not surrender easily, however: as urban populations grew "even faster than the farm population was shrinking," dries answered by getting behind the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924. Astonishingly, they also blocked the 1920 congressional reapportionment through most of the decade.

The leadership among anti-Prohibitionists had also shifted during the 1920s, moving from the heads of the alcohol industry to the captains of industry, who wanted

alcohol to be legal and taxable. The chair of General Motors and the DuPont Company, Pierre S. du Pont, became the "indisputable commander in chief" of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment. His organization's goal: repeal of the federal income tax, which was instituted as part of Prohibition to replace alcohol excise tax revenue.

Prohibition suffered another blow in the 1928 elections. Even as voters rejected wet Roman Catholic Democrat Al Smith, they voted down stricter liquor law enforcement. But the Depression is what really finished off Prohibition. Hampered from the start by skimpy federal appropriations, in the teeth of economic disaster states and localities had no way to enforce Volstead. By 1930, a "virtual local option" held sway everywhere in the U.S. In the 1930 elections, voters punished the Republicans for the economy, and (wet) Democrats benefited. The 21st Amendment was ratified in December 1933. Yet unintended consequences continued. Okrent observes that because drink could now be regulated, "the Twenty-first Amendment made it harder, not easier, to get a drink."

Readers with a passing interest in the Prohibition era will enjoy Okrent's raucous telling. Those who want a more measured account can consult classics such as Norman Clark's *Deliver Us from Evil* (1976), W. J. Rorabaugh's *The Alcoholic Republic* (1979), John Kobler's *Ardent Spirits* (1973) and Thomas Pegram's *Battling Demon Rum* (1998). Okrent clearly places his sympathies with the wets. Yet good history empathizes with its subjects in order to understand them—including actors whom history proved wrong in some way. Novelist Anne Lamott teaches her writing students to remember that the villain has a heart and the hero has great flaws. Okrent's emphasis on the wets as this era's heroes—not just in spite of but because of their flaws—contributes to the book's jokey feel. His retelling scripts the dries as thoroughly misguided at best and villainous at worst, and therefore blinds us to some of the sincere motives of the Prohibition activists.