

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 95: Temperance and Prohibition. This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons, such as Allen. If you want to support HANZ go to patreon.com/historyaotearoa. Last time, we covered the entire history of the Dunedin based beer brewery Speight's up until the turn of the millennium. During the course of those episodes, we touched on a couple of different subjects that really deserve episodes in their own right. One of those topics was prohibition which I had to cut quite a bit of content from because it wasn't super relevant to Speight's but a lot of it is really interesting stuff. So we are going to retread a bit of ground but give you a bit more info and wider context as to what was going on since in our first go around our lens was a bit more focussed.

So lets cast our minds back to those earlier episodes where we talked about temperance societies. These popped up out of church groups in the 1820s and 30s to try and stop, what they deemed to be the overconsumption of alcohol in New Zealand which in turn they saw as the root of all of society's problems, like poverty, disease, neglect and just general immorality. But although we discussed their motivations and how they tried to achieve their goals, we didn't really discuss whether this was a valid concern. Not so much the alcohol being the root of all evil thing, I think that's a much more complicated topic, but the broader question of: Did New Zealand have a drinking problem? The short answer to that is yes, heavy drinking in colonial New Zealand was very common, especially in male dominated industries like the agriculture and maritime sectors. It was apparently so bad that some would say that the main cause of death in NZ was 'drink, drowning and drowning while drunk.' By 1847, one in every eight Aucklanders had been convicted for drunkenness. By 1870, nationally, it was 17 per 1000 people, though this did gradually go down in the 20th century until being drunk in public was no longer a crime. A lot of the problem was that the beverage of choice was often whiskey, locally made and designed to get you drunk fast. Additionally this whiskey was being made by all sorts of different people with little to no oversight or regulation meaning it was of very low quality and potentially quite dangerous even if consumed in moderation. The govt imposed taxes and duties on spirits to slow the amount coming into the country but all that achieved was that whiskey became a rich mans drink cause they could afford it when the hotels increased prices in response. This also led to the Parliament buildings having small rooms where drunk MPs could be locked in until they sobered up. Whiskey and other spirits was generally the main beverage that temperance groups were against early on. Funnily enough, some of the temperance groups on the goldfields weren't advocating for full abstinence from drink, they knew that this wasn't a realistic goal since gold miners were probably some of the heaviest drinkers in the country. Instead they tried to get them to just not drink spirits. This inadvertently encouraged them to drink beer, which would later become a large part of their focus.

So it was definitely an issue, but the caveat to this was that, to be fair, agriculture and maritime were the main industries and Aotearoa had a similar economy to pretty much every other British colony at the time, meaning Kiwis were hardly an exception in having a few too many. In particular, it was an issue in Australia and the US, where prohibition also gained a lot of traction. Even in Britain herself there was a lot of rampant drunkenness as people moved from the country to the cities for work due to the Industrial Revolution, resulting in people drinking more to get away from their bleak situation. Overall, I think New Zealand likely did have a problematic relationship with alcohol in the 19th century but this was hardly unique and was seen in many different places, especially British colonies.

The first instance of prohibition in NZ came about in the middle of the rise of the temperance societies in 1835 in Horeke in Hokianga, Northland. This saw Lieutenant Thomas McDonnell ban booze in the small settlement, searching any ships that arrived and if any grog was found, he tipped it overboard. The next year a public notice, the first to be printed in Aotearoa, invited people to a

meeting to establish a temperance society. Four years after that, Te Tiriti o Waitangi was signed between the British crown and over 500 Māori which, if we skip over a lot of stuff, ultimately led to William Hobson becoming the first governor of New Zealand. One of the first acts that Hobson ever put through, once he was finished ignoring the Treaty and establishing British sovereignty over the islands, was to prohibit the distillation of spirits. It was also common to see Pākehā using alcohol to get Māori drunk before accepting their trade deals that heavily favoured Pākehā. Hobson also imposed restrictions on Māori buying alcohol in 1847, but this was unsuccessful. In 1851 justices were given the power to just cancel liquor licences of any pubs that were getting out of hand but that also didn't seem to have much of an effect. Throughout our history, although politicians did often say that the scourge of drunkenness did need to be curbed, they usually weren't fair about it. One of the first things passed in the General Assembly, NZ's early parliament, was to exclude the Parliament Buildings from the laws restricting the sale of booze!

As we know, it wouldn't be until the 1880s that temperance societies and the prohibition movement really picked up steam. This came in the form of the Licensing Act 1881 which was the first big piece of legislation that restricted the sale of alcohol. To refresh your memory, this was the law made it so liquor licences could only be issued by committees which were elected by the public. This went ok for a few years until 1886 when the temperance societies learned how to kinda game the system by ensuring only temperance supporters got elected and thus they could revoke previous licences and deny future ones, effectively enforcing prohibition in their area. We covered this in episode 89 and I glossed over quite a lot of stuff when I did that. Those scraps in parliament, the near fracture of the Liberal party and giving women the vote had a lot going on and even in these episodes we can't cover it all but I want to take you a bit deeper into these events to give you a better understanding of what was happening in Wellington, outside the viewpoint of Speight's. In 1886 the New Zealand Alliance for the Suppression of the Liquor Traffic was formed. Headed by former Premier Sir William Fox, this was a national organisation that merged a bunch of local temperance groups together to protest licensing laws and distribute pamphlets. They also petitioned parliament fairly often. This would go on to be a significant organisation in the prohibition movement for the next 60 years, to the point where it "took on the fervour of a moral crusade". They drew their support from many different areas, from Protestants who wanted to combat the sin of drunkenness, humanitarians who saw what alcohol was doing to Māori and the working class Pākehā as well as the women's groups who were having issues with the effects of alcohol in the home and family.

The other major group in the movement was the Women's Christian Temperance Union. This was established in 1885 and they campaigned strongly for the women's side of the issue as they were seen as the ones most adversely affected by drinking since they relied on their husbands for money, along with the obvious domestic abuse issues. This is the group that women's suffrage leader Kate Sheppard was part of when she successfully campaigned to get women the vote, temperance being a major driver for that. The NZWCTU really deserves its own episode because they are a fascinating and controversial organisation but just to talk a bit about their involvement in the prohibition movement; The union defined temperance as "moderation in all things healthful; abstinence in all things harmful". Each member paid an annual fee and would make the pledge "I hereby solemnly promise, God helping me, to abstain from all intoxicating liquors, including wine, beer and cider and to employ all proper means to discourage the use of and traffic in the same." This was later amended to add 'the menace of narcotic poisons and drugs', this including tobacco.

Obviously the NZWCTU did a lot of campaigning to try and get the prohibition vote over the threshold needed for local and later national prohibition. In the run up to the first referendum in 1894 they pointed out that by giving the public three options, continuance, reduce licences and

local prohibition, that the anti-alcohol vote would be split between the last two options. The Union implies that this meant that prohibition in electorates couldn't be achieved as when you combine the votes of those two options, usually more people voted for that than continuence. But I would posit that those voted for reduced licences wanted some moderation rather than full prohibition so I think it isn't true to say that those two options split the vote of people who were closely aligned in their views. They later claimed that the addition of state control to the national continuece and national prohibition options also split the vote but again, IMO, these two options aren't aligned in their values and state control never got a meaningful amount of votes anyway. This is also despite that fact that there was a period where state control wasn't an option and it was just between continuence or prohibition, which still didn't see prohibition achieve the threshold.

Without the option for national prohibition the hope was to get each electorate dry one by one across multiple elections, achieving 12 dry electorates by 1908. This was obviously made easier in 1911 when the option of national prohibition was added to the regular referendums.

The Union, the Alliance and other organisations continued to campaign for prohibition post-WW2 despite never getting more than 40% of the vote every three years. When parliament were looking to remove referendums in 1987, the movement protested claiming that the triennial votes were a good indicator of public opinion and that part of the issue was that the prohibition vote was split between two options so the govt should change it to be just a vote between continuence and prohibition. As we know, the govt went ahead and got rid of the referendums.

Although the Union supported measures to regulate and limit the sale or consumption of alcohol, like setting up the ILT, they did so with the ultimate goal of prohibition, constantly sending letters to newspapers, MPs and parliament in general.

In the same vein, the Union was a main driver in the women's sufferage movement, but only as a means to an end. They thought that women would be more likely to vote for prohibition, or at least vote for prohibition MPs, and thus would get it over the line in the referendums or those MPs would make legislative reform in parliament. "The enfranchisement of women will result in the moral uplifting of humanity". Although temperance was the main goal there were a good number of people in the Union that wanted to see women's sufferage just cause it was a good and right thing to do. Women who wanted sufferage for its own sake were generally part of Baptist, Congregationalist and Methodist churches as these were more into giving women equal status than some other churches at the time. Kate Sheppard was made the superintendant of the franchise and legislation department of the union, whose job it was to lobby the government, which is how she kinda ended up being a major part of the sufferage campaign. Other women's related issues they have advocated for are women becoming JPs and to serve on juries and women becoming cops which was fully allowed in 1973.

The youth arm of the union encouraged mothers to bring their infants and place them on the cradle roll, "promising to teach them the principles of total abstinence and purity." They would meet regularly for hymns, Scripture readings, prayers, etc. with meetings obviously increasing in complexity as the kids got older. Such as the more recent kids publication T. K. News, which was a NZWCTU publication aimed at kids 6-12 years old with games, puzzles etc. One of these issues had its main message around fetal alcohol disorder, dealing with the subject in "plain language" but it was adapted to be kid appropriate, according to the Union. The youth arm of the union dwindled as other groups with similar goals became more popular, such as the orgnisation behind SADD.

Overall the NZWCTU were set up to promote “traditional Christian values centered on the family” and as such the Union “expressed its concern at what it saw as a trend towards a more permissive society that cast aside those Christian values.” That is to say they pushed the government for various things not just suffrage and prohibition. Some of these could be seen by wider society as mostly good, such as advocating for the raise in age of consent from 13 to 16 in 1896 while other things could be seen as being mostly bad, such as being against the legalisation of homosexuality, which they called “repugnant indulgence” and being against abortion. In some cases, support for prohibition came from the pro-abortion women’s groups who wanted to vote for prohibition as a protest of the anti-abortion laws, something the Union was not happy about. The union has also run soup kitchens and raised money for the poor during the 1880s depression. They visited those in hospital to give them lollies, cake and flowers as well as helping the elderly do various day to day tasks. They have also provided accommodation for women who were “rescued” from prostitution and helped female prisoners integrate back into wider society. The Union also had a key role in helping to establish the first maternity hospital in Southland in Invercargill in 1917. What I am saying is that these gals were a very mixed bag.

Going back to the Licensing Act 1881, we know that the temperance movement’s attempt to use the law to enforce their own ideology resulted in the committees having what the court’s called “an incurable bias”. After this the Alliance began to campaign the government to amend the law to allow electorates to vote directly if they wanted to become dry. This was quite thorny for parliament as it went across party lines and was in particular an issue for the Liberal government and the Premier Richard Seddon. He wasn’t a fan of giving women the vote or giving into prohibitionist demands since he used to work the goldfields and even owned a pub on the West Coast in his early life. However, another member of his party, Sir Robert Stout was (ironically) a prohibitionist. This was a problem for Seddon cause Stout was a very strong member of the party to the point where Stout was a contender for the leadership of the party and the nation when the former Premier died. So for Seddon to go up against Stout could fracture the party and threaten his position as Premier. In the end, Seddon made the compromise with Stout to pass the Alcoholic Liquors Sale Control Act in 1893. This was the one that allowed electorates to vote for licence reduction or to go locally dry, as long as 50% of eligible people voted and 60% of those voted dry. This in turn led to the formation of the no licence leagues, who were formed and run by the Alliance.

From then on, the story pretty much stays the same as we mentioned in the Speight’s episodes, the prohibitionists and alcohol industry go toe to toe every three years to see if any electorate would go dry. Clutha in Otago was the first electorate to go dry in 1894 with Invercargill being the first city in 1905. By 1920, 12 of the 76 electorates had gone dry. When WWI kicked off, the temperance movement as a whole went quiet for a bit, with the vote for prohibition in the 1914 election dropping some percentage points. The referendums for licensing ceased for as long as the war was going on but that didn’t stop the Alliance, who campaigned to stop the sale of booze to soldiers and gave the soldiers themselves pamphlets about how terrible alcohol was. When King George V announced he had banned alcohol from the royal household due to the war, the Alliance tried to convince soldiers that they should do the same for their leader. The Alliance also presented a bunch of petitions to parliament and the National Efficiency Board, who was made to ensure the country ran, well efficiently, during the war. These petitions recommended that they end liquor sales in the interest of their namesake. Although the government didn’t do that, they did give the Alliance something in 1917, the six o’clock swill.

Next time, we will talk more about the swill, how it influenced Kiwi culture and round out our discussion on prohibition with the all important question: Did it work?

If you want to send me feedback, ask a question, suggest a topic or just have a chinwag you can find my email and social media on historyaotearoa.com. You can also find helpful resources there like transcripts, sources and translations for some of the Te Reo Māori we have used. You can help support HANZ through Patreon, buying merch or giving us a review, it means a lot and helps spread the story of Aotearoa New Zealand. As always, haere tū atu, hoki tū mai. See you next time.