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Spirits of Defiance: National Prohibition and Jazz Age Literature, 1920-1933

Kathleen Morgan Drowne

Missouri University of Science and Technology, kdrowne@mst.edu

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SPIRITS OF DEFIANCE

Spirits of Defiance

NATIONAL PROHIBITION AND
JAZZ AGE LITERATURE, 1920–1933

Kathleen Drowne



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For Patrick and Genevieve

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When National Prohibition was repealed in 1933, happy drinkers resurrected the peppy 1929 Tin Pan Alley song “Happy Days Are Here Again” to mark their celebration, even adding new lyrics to attest to the joys of drinking legal beer. Now that I’ve reached the end of this project, I’d like to resurrect this song myself and add some new lyrics to honor the extensive network of wonderful, smart, talented people who helped me bring this book into being. Over the years I have relied heavily on the wisdom, advice, and support of professors, colleagues, friends, and family, and I feel deep debts of gratitude not only to those generous individuals who read and commented on drafts of this book, but also to many people who never read a single page of my manuscript but who also never hesitated to offer steady encouragement and kind words when I needed them most. It is because of them that, for me, happy days are here again.

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INTRODUCTION

Prohibition and American Literature, 1920–1933

“’Tis simple,” said the Man from Minn.,
“To cure the world of mortal sin—
 Just legislate against it.”
Then up spake Congress with a roar,
“We never thought of that before.
 Let’s go!”
 And they commenced it.
—Wallace Irwin, “Owed to Volstead” (1922)

On April 15, 1919, more than nine months before National Prohibition was to go into effect, a *Wall Street Journal* headline made a dire prediction: “Bone-Dry Literature Coming.” “The modern writer,” the article announced, “has a new problem to face. National Prohibition will make literature ‘dry.’” The article went on to explain, facetiously, that due to the approaching prohibition on alcoholic beverages, scheduled to go into effect at midnight on January 16, 1920, “The [literary] hero may still flick the ashes from his cigarette, but when the time comes for him to take a drink he must order a chocolate soda.” The article also spoofed the kinds of seduction scenes that readers could soon expect to find in Prohibition-era novels: “She sipped her buttermilk slowly and calmly noted its effect. After the second bottle she was a woman emancipated. She reached across the table and untied her handsome admirer’s cravat.”¹

The *New York Times* published a similarly satirical article, also in 1919, under the lengthy headline “Must We De-Alcoholize Literature? How Shakespeare, Rare Ben Jonson, Robert Burns, and Omar Khayyam Will Sound if They Are Revised to Fit Those Sober Days Soon to Come.” This article noted that “[o]ne of the first means of enforcing national prohibition . . . will be the suppression of all advertising of alcoholic drinks,” and that temperance reformers might easily consider those “convivial” passages in literature that describe episodes of drinking to be a form of advertising.

If so, the article reasoned, then censors may attempt to expurgate or revise famous literary works by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, and others to eliminate all references to “exhilarating beverages.”² This article, like the previous *Wall Street Journal* piece, offered tongue-in-cheek speculation on the impact that Prohibition laws might have on American and even world literature. Underneath the humorous tone and witty examples, however, these articles also revealed a real sense of uneasiness about the potential consequences and far-reaching effects of the new liquor legislation. Certainly nobody would seriously attempt to “de-alcoholize” Shakespeare’s Jack Falstaff or Dickens’s old Fezziwig, yet a sense of apprehension and uncertainty clearly existed regarding the future of American life and, more particularly, American literature in a dry nation.

National Prohibition obviously did not result in the creation of a “bone-dry literature” in which heroes drank chocolate soda, women behaved brazenly under the influence of buttermilk, and Mr. Pickwick was bereft of his favorite punch. History also proves specious the solemn claim of British novelist and Cambridge professor Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, that “under enforced prohibition the United States will never produce a great literature,” which the *New York Times* reported in a 1922 front-page article. During a debate with a teetotaling academic, Quiller-Couch actually went so far as to declare, “high literature, both in its creation and its full enjoyment, demands total manhood of which a teetotal manhood is obviously a modification,” and that few if any non-drinkers have ever become great poets or critics.³ In hindsight we recognize that, contrary to Quiller-Couch’s oddly gendered prediction, the era of enforced Prohibition coincided with an enormous outpouring of acclaimed American literature that remains unparalleled today. Some of the most celebrated works by William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Langston Hughes, Sinclair Lewis, Dorothy Parker, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston first reached the shelves during Prohibition, as did many now-forgotten but once-popular novels, such as Elinor Glyn’s *It* (1927) and Upton Sinclair’s *The Wet Parade* (1931). Interestingly, as Quiller-Couch noted, many of our most highly prized writers of the Prohibition era were, themselves, enthusiastic drinkers who felt little compulsion to obey the new liquor laws. Their blatant disregard for Prohibition surfaces in many works of fiction from this period, sometimes overtly and sometimes obliquely.

National Prohibition did exert a profound influence on American literature, but not in the ways that any of the above observers predicted. Critics of the time, though, remained ambivalent about what to make of its effect on American letters. For example, in a 1923 *New York Times* review of Ednah Aiken’s forgettable and largely forgotten novel about

Prohibition, *If Today Be Sweet*, the anonymous reviewer vehemently discounted the very attempt of contemporary writers to wrestle with the cultural significance of the Eighteenth Amendment. “We are still in the midst of the vast overturning that the prohibition amendment occasioned and it is altogether too soon to draw from the situation any large truths which carry conviction,” the reviewer declared firmly. “Years hence it will possibly be an engrossing and instructive matter to consider from a fictional viewpoint the era in which America shifted from wet to dry. But at the present moment it is a dubious matter until the generation directly affected (both socially and financially) has passed away and given place to a new and impartial one.”⁴ This reviewer failed to acknowledge, however, that dozens of fiction writers, as well as historians, reporters, politicians, artists, musicians, movie directors, and even cartoonists, had already begun drawing conclusions about Prohibition—some of them, like Sir Quiller-Couch, even before it went into effect—and they continued their analyses well beyond Prohibition’s 1933 repeal. National Prohibition ranks as one of the most hotly debated political controversies of the 1920s, and its reverberations extended into nearly every aspect of American popular culture; few public figures who had the ear of the nation declined an opportunity to comment upon its great wisdom or its immense folly.

Not surprisingly, many novelists and short-story writers added their voices to the chorus by incorporating into their works their experiences with and opinions about National Prohibition. Some writers who believed that Prohibition was unnecessary, inappropriate, and ultimately futile used their fiction to promulgate these views. In *To Make My Bread* (1932), for example, Grace Lumpkin offers compelling evidence to support how the Prohibition laws unjustly punished the struggling farmers of southern Appalachia. And Wallace Thurman, in his graphic portrayals of inebriated Harlem nightlife in *The Blacker the Berry . . .* (1929) and *Infants of the Spring* (1932), articulates his disdain for the hopelessly ineffective dry laws. In fact, the “wet” politics of many writers surfaced in their sympathetic depiction of characters who defy the Prohibition laws and their unsympathetic censure of characters who support the Prohibition cause.

It would be far too reductive, however, to accept the idea that, in the American literature of the 1920s and early 1930s, violating Prohibition is always perceived as morally superior to obeying it. In fact, many of the popular novels and stories of that era, most of which have now been largely forgotten, take precisely the opposite stance. Mass-circulation magazines and popular novels catered to a conservative, middle-class readership deeply invested in the eventual success of Prohibition, and for us to assume that Americans were united in their common loathing of the liquor laws would deny the vigorous support that the laws received in hundreds of

thousands of American homes. It is interesting to note, however, that the fiction of this era that has been incorporated into the American literary canon over the past seventy years is, for the most part, anti-Prohibition. And in those works that include overt commentary on the Eighteenth Amendment, illegal drinking is portrayed as a highly symbolic and meaningful behavior that allows writers to explain—and justify—their characters' legal and moral transgressions.

More often, however, literary depictions of unlawful drinking appear without any authorial comment, explanation, or justification regarding the politics of National Prohibition. In such scenes, drinking is portrayed as an apparently neutral activity, a common pastime to be enjoyed by ordinary adults. This lack of explicit alcohol-related commentary has led many readers to accept these drinking scenes as, indeed, politically and morally neutral. In fact, readers unfamiliar with the details of Prohibition often do not even realize that these characters are breaking any laws whatsoever in their pursuit of a cocktail or a bottle of gin. Yet one of Prohibition's major social effects was to politicize what had previously been essentially apolitical events. During the 1920s and early 1930s, house parties, nightclub get-togethers, luncheons, and other ordinary social gatherings became politically charged, depending on the presence (or absence) of alcohol. Readers attuned to this important cultural context recognize that scenes of Prohibition-era carousing do carry moral and political weight that often complicates the text in significant ways.

Characters such as clever bootleggers and wily moonshiners, settings such as dingy speakeasies and raucous cabarets, and the shadowy influence of “the law” in general and revenue agents in particular surface in many works of American literature produced during National Prohibition. Yet the history of those nearly fourteen years, during which the nation underwent, in the words of President Herbert Hoover, “a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive,” has been relegated to a footnote—if that—in most literary studies of the era. This omission is both surprising and unfortunate, especially given the many insightful journal articles and books that have been published about the alcoholic tendencies of writers including Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Lewis, Thurman, and Hemingway, as well as about the cascade of transformations that reshaped American popular culture during the Jazz Age. *Spirits of Defiance* seeks to fill this gap in American literary studies by demonstrating how understanding the culture surrounding National Prohibition can lead to a deeper, more meaningful, and more nuanced understanding of the many literary works written and published between 1920, the year the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect, and 1933, the year it was repealed.

In its broadest strokes, then, *Spirits of Defiance* aims to identify and

explain elements of Prohibition culture that permeate literary texts produced during this era. Bootleggers, moonshiners, and revenuers seldom populate twenty-first-century fiction, but they were familiar—sometimes even stock—characters in the fiction of the 1920s and early 1930s. The sheer number of uniquely Prohibition-era characters that enliven such works as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926), Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928), William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (1931), and literally dozens of other Jazz Age works suggests the widespread public awareness and even acceptance of such figures at the time. However, few of today’s readers are sufficiently attuned to the culture of Prohibition to recognize subtle connotations associated with these characters. For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby’s involvement with a chain of drugstores would not register as a relevant aspect of Prohibition culture to readers unfamiliar with the ways that pharmacies funneled money for large-scale bootlegging operations during the 1920s. Such details actually offer useful information about the origins of Gatsby’s mysterious fortune and the nature and scope of his business with his gangster-mentor, Meyer Wolfsheim. To cite another example, readers unacquainted with the “buffet” and other “good-time flats” of Prohibition-era Harlem may not fully appreciate the extent to which Jake Brown, the protagonist in *Home to Harlem*, immersed himself in the outlaw culture of bootleg liquor, gambling, and prostitution. By clarifying these sometimes obscure elements of everyday life during Prohibition, *Spirits of Defiance* will help readers achieve a more sophisticated understanding of the literature produced between 1920 and 1933.

Treating fictional works as lenses through which we can better appreciate history can be admittedly a complicated maneuver. Nevertheless, I argue that the authors included in this study have composed novels and short stories that realistically portray and, as a result, help to illuminate particular facets of American life under National Prohibition. Realism itself is a slippery literary term, and it is not my intent to debate the nature of literary representation as it pertains to the material world. Nor would I argue with literary critics who classify writers such as William Faulkner not as realists but as modernists. The scope of this project lies solely in fictional representations of Prohibition culture that have been corroborated by nonfiction sources, particularly newspaper and magazine articles and scholarly historical studies. Collectively, the works of fiction addressed in this book offer a realistic, historically accurate picture of how different kinds of Americans responded to the legal, social, and cultural changes wrought by the passage of National Prohibition.

Of course, writers told the “truth” about Prohibition in a number of ways. In a few instances, such as in Upton Sinclair’s pro-Prohibition *The*

Wet Parade, the merit of the Eighteenth Amendment as a noble and worthy ideal takes center stage as the primary subject of the story. In contrast, the challenge and appeal of participating in the culture of Prohibition by purchasing and consuming illegal alcohol provided some writers with the foundations for various other plot lines. For example, stories such as Dorothy Parker's "Big Blonde" (1930) and Sherwood Anderson's "A Jury Case" (1933), as well as scenes in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry . . .* and *Infants of the Spring*, and Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*, infuse with drama those moments when characters choose to step beyond the protection of the law and participate in an illicit, liquor-drenched world. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) and *The Great Gatsby*, Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, Zora Neale Hurston's "Muttsy" (1926), and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, scenes of Prohibition-era drinking and carousing offer important and meaningful backdrops to the primary action. Subtler still are works such as Walter White's *The Fire in the Flint* (1924), Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930), and William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, in which Prohibition provides an opportunity for the authors to present much broader commentary on the class and racial conflicts that riddled American society.

Although all the works included in this study are set against the colorful background of National Prohibition, it is important to recognize that, with the important exception of Sinclair's *The Wet Parade*, these authors were not deliberately writing political propaganda to support or attack the liquor laws. For the most part, they left the debate surrounding Prohibition to the newspaper editors, magazine writers, politicians, and reformers who wrote and published literally millions of words during the 1920s and early 1930s about the wisdom and efficacy (or lack thereof) of the Eighteenth Amendment. The writers discussed in this book did, however, absorb the realities of life under National Prohibition, and by portraying the underground world of drinking they were, to a degree, politicizing their fiction. For example, in Dorothy Parker's "Just a Little One" (1928), the female narrator accompanies her male friend to a speakeasy, and during the course of their increasingly drunken conversation she downs no fewer than half a dozen cocktails. Before Prohibition this would have been an unlikely scene indeed, for respectable middle-class women rarely patronized public drinking establishments. But in this story, not only does the woman unapologetically patronize the speakeasy, but she also assertively orders multiple drinks, even to the point of her public inebriation. Speakeasy culture, the increased presence of women drinking in public, and the details surrounding the quality of Prohibition-era liquor (her frequent comments about the delights of drinking "real Scotch," for

example) are critical elements of “Just a Little One.” Furthermore, the lack of authorial censure of this woman or her surroundings identifies the story politically as one that celebrates the lawlessness of Prohibition-era life and the freedoms that women enjoy, ironically, as a result of this prohibitive legislation. The absence of commentary about the actions of this couple further suggests that this scene portrays relatively typical behavior among young men and women in 1928 New York. In other words, even works such as “Just a Little One” that do not overtly comment on the political aspects of Prohibition are often caught up in the small but revealing details of life under the influence of this legislation.

From time to time in this study I refer to “Prohibition culture,” by which I mean the social forces, trends, phenomena, influences, language, attitudes, and behaviors that emerged in the 1920s and early 1930s as direct or indirect responses to the federal laws restricting alcoholic beverages. Elements of Prohibition culture do not always relate to drinking explicitly, although they are often linked. Rather, Prohibition culture encompasses all the ways that Americans assimilated the Eighteenth Amendment and its attendant legislation into their daily lives, including the new morals and attitudes that Prohibition helped to foster, particularly among members of the younger generation. One obvious example of Prohibition culture is the rapid proliferation of speakeasies, blind pigs, roadhouses—all the illicit watering holes that appeared on the American landscape to provide customers with illegal drinks. Other, less observable elements of Prohibition culture include the personal and economic relationships that developed between otherwise law-abiding citizens and their bootleggers and other purveyors of alcoholic beverages, including messenger boys, hotel bellhops, soda jerks, pharmacists, and even doctors and priests (in fact, one of William Faulkner’s own personal bootleggers was allegedly a young New Orleans priest who took his customers’ orders in the belfry of the St. Louis Cathedral). For example, during the years of Prohibition, doctors increased the number of medicinal alcohol prescriptions they wrote for their patients by almost a hundred times the level of previous years. Bellhops in hotels survived almost entirely on the tips they made by delivering liquor to guests, and soda jerks served up fountain drinks that hardly resembled soda. Formerly lawful places such as doctor’s offices and soda shops were frequently transformed into illegal fronts behind which the black-market liquor economy thrived.

Another facet of Prohibition culture involves the dozens of popular Tin Pan Alley, jazz, blues, and hillbilly songs that directly addressed the alcohol controversy. These songs brought the highly controversial and politicized issue of National Prohibition into the realm of casual entertainment. The proliferation of radios and phonographs during the 1920s, along with

the mass marketing of mail-order records, made it possible for youth across the nation to sing along and dance to such topical numbers as “Prohibition Blues” (1919) or “If I Meet the Guy Who Made This Country Dry” (1920), regardless of their personal politics. Similarly, dance crazes such as the Charleston, the fox-trot, and the Black Bottom became part of Prohibition culture because they were wildly popular at speakeasies, nightclubs, roadhouses, cocktail parties, and other venues that arose directly because of Prohibition. And certain widespread and transgressive behaviors that became popular during the 1920s, such as women drinking, petting, smoking cigarettes, and dressing more alluringly, also sprang, to a degree, from the social climate that resulted in part from Prohibition legislation.

A more subtle layer of Prohibition culture is also critical to this study. The Eighteenth Amendment and the accompanying Volstead Act, also passed in 1919, represented a blatant attempt by the U.S. government to impose a standard of common morality on its citizens by criminalizing what had never before been considered a federal offense. The average American was profoundly concerned with the Prohibition laws because, as historian Herbert Asbury claimed in *The Great Illusion: An Informal History of Prohibition* (1950), they “interfered with his personal habits and appetites and pleasures, and threatened to abolish the means of procuring them.” Some zealous “dry” leaders and government officials wanted liquor violators to be penalized in much the same way as murderers, burglars, and drug peddlers, while “wets” pleaded with the courts that liquor violations in no way approached such violent or antisocial crimes. In fact, few “wets” could be convinced that they or their bootleggers were criminals at all; rather, as Asbury explained, the typical American drinker during Prohibition believed that “the man who sold him his liquor was ‘good old Joe, a fine fellow’” (165). Nevertheless, the Volstead Act authorized a schedule of fines and prison terms that left no doubt that all activities related to manufacturing, selling, and transporting alcoholic beverages were indeed considered by the federal government to be criminal behaviors. In fact, in 1929 the Volstead Act was supplemented by the Jones Act, which increased the maximum penalty for Prohibition violators to five years in prison and \$10,000—even for first offenders—and made any liquor violation a felony. Not surprisingly, the Jones Act intensified the public’s criticism of the government’s efforts to curtail the drinking habits of its citizens.

This unprecedented government intervention into saloons, restaurants, clubs, and personal liquor cabinets created for millions of Americans a moral conflict that was much more complicated than merely whether or not they would choose to drink alcoholic beverages. Prohibition led

countless citizens to violate federal laws on a regular basis, which historians argue led to a lack of reverence for certain forms of authority, particularly legal authority. Every time Americans patronized a speakeasy, bought a pint of gin from a bootlegger, asked a doctor for an unnecessary prescription for “medicinal alcohol,” or otherwise dodged the provisions of the Volstead Act, they chose to follow their own principles rather than allow the U.S. Constitution to determine for them what was “moral” behavior. Small as they may seem, these acts were repeated thousands of times an hour during the nearly fourteen years of Prohibition. These commonplace violations of the Eighteenth Amendment eroded Americans’ long-cherished sense of patriotism; one important consequence of Prohibition that began during the 1920s and resonated long after repeal was the general citizenry’s overall loss of respect for the power and wisdom of the government. Literary scholar John Erskine commented in 1927, “the growing disrespect for law is the most serious menace to our society” (42), and this disrespect flourished, he argued, in both “dry” and “wet” camps. Prohibition supporters were disillusioned by the government’s inability to enforce a law they so fervently believed in, while Prohibition opponents resented the government’s interference in the first place. Virtually no one was satisfied with the government’s performance regarding Prohibition.

Effective legal enforcement of Prohibition proved impossible in part because the thriving temperance movement in the United States had originally been based primarily on moral issues, not legal ones. The Eighteenth Amendment, as well as the hundreds of local, county, and state dry laws that were passed prior to 1919, were ratified largely in the spirit of morality—because abstaining from alcohol was the right thing to do, the correct way to teach children, the righteous path, the quickest road to spiritual salvation, and the surest way to alleviate human suffering. Members of the Anti-Saloon League, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, and other reform-minded organizations endeavored to convince their fellow Americans that abstaining from alcohol carried with it its own intrinsic rewards, not to mention a home life that was less violent and more financially stable. But after National Prohibition went into effect in 1920, legal arguments against alcohol rapidly replaced moral imperatives; in other words, the claim that all Americans must abstain from alcohol simply because federal law requires it superseded any claim of temperance as its own moral reward. In 1924 Mabel Walker Willebrandt, the assistant U.S. attorney general, essentially abandoned moral justifications for Prohibition when she asked members of the Woman’s National Committee for Law Enforcement to “become a positive force to inspire obedience to law” and thereby set an example of good behavior for their communities to follow. President Calvin Coolidge echoed Willebrandt’s

appeal, calling for adherence to liquor legislation not because of any moral, spiritual, or even financial benefit to be gained from resisting alcohol, but out of respect for the U.S. Constitution and the gravity of its amendments (Murdock 100). Yet many Americans found even this legal argument unconvincing. As one Columbia University student explained to his professor, “They say we should cultivate respect for the prohibition law because they fixed it so it can’t be repealed. Queer reason for respecting a law!” (Erskine 48).

Of course, millions of Americans casually violated the Prohibition laws because they saw no connection between morality and drinking alcohol. Others drank in defiance of National Prohibition because breaking these laws allowed them to make a political statement. In many contexts, defying Prohibition became a socially acceptable way for people to rebel, to define themselves in opposition to their government, and to convince themselves that they were independent of, or even above, the law. Those who reached their teens and twenties during the 1920s seemed particularly susceptible to this line of thinking. Historian Norman Clark notes in *Deliver Us from Evil: An Interpretation of American Prohibition* (1976) that for young people during Prohibition, “the raised glass rejected any authority higher than individual pleasure. And it was easy. If a young person in the United States chose to transport or sell a bottle in the back seat of his automobile, this was a matter for which the risks were far outweighed by the promised rewards in prestige and status” (152). In other words, the “individual pleasure” pursued by these drinkers resided less in the taste of alcohol (which tended to be pretty awful during Prohibition) or even the feeling of inebriation, but rather in the social esteem that came with casually partaking of the forbidden. Martha Bensley Bruère, a well-known social worker and writer of the late 1920s and early 1930s, summed up this youthful attitude by commenting that during Prohibition, “drinking by young people was ‘an adventure, a gesture of daring, a sign of revolt, an illusion of power, part of the game they call life’” (Clark 152).

Spirits of Defiance focuses on a variety of novels and short stories, all written and published between 1920 and 1933, including many works currently included in the American literary canon. I have chosen to limit the time span in this way so as to identify how writers incorporated Prohibition culture into their work during the actual years these liquor laws were on the books, without benefit of hindsight or constitutional repeal. In order to recover this culture of Prohibition and bring it back into view, I have relied heavily on social histories of the era, biographies, cultural studies, and newspaper and magazine reportage. And, since neither white nor black writers wrote in isolation from one another, I have juxtaposed their works within chapters despite their often-differing polit-

ical and artistic agendas. While this is not a biographical project, some authors' life experiences and personal politics do bear on their literary representations of Prohibition culture, and I have tried to remain sensitive to these cases without overstating their importance. I have found that Prohibition permeated so much of American popular culture during the 1920s that I could have replaced any of my selected works with others that would have been equally illuminating. My choice of texts, then, is meant to be representative, not comprehensive.

Chapter 1, "Remembering the Culture of National Prohibition," offers a brief overview of the social and cultural history of the Prohibition era; the remaining chapters investigate various aspects of Prohibition culture that appear in literary works of the 1920s and early 1930s. The second and third chapters profile characters associated with Prohibition who populate the literature of the era. Chapter 2, "Outside the Law: Liquor Providers of the Prohibition Era," closely examines the literary presence of moonshiners, bootleggers, and revenue agents, and explores the ubiquitous liquor trafficking that took place in the biggest of cities and the smallest of towns. From William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, in which the operations of rural moonshiners lead to rape and murder, to Rudolph Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho* (1928), in which a ruthless bootlegger threatens the security of all of Harlem, to Upton Sinclair's *The Wet Parade*, in which an honest revenue agent is martyred to a hopeless cause, these works and others depict the various figures who were responsible for perpetuating or combating the underground liquor economy.

Chapter 3, "These Wild Young People: Drinking and Youth Culture," profiles the figures of the "sheik" and the "flapper"—the emblematic young male and female revelers of the Prohibition era—and examines their roles in shaping the youth culture of the 1920s. Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*, for example, portrays a flapper whose manners and morals could have come straight from the pages of a sophisticated New York magazine, but she actually hails from a rural African American community in the long-dry state of Kansas. In contrast, the sophisticated flappers who crowd the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis sometimes reveal an innocence of spirit seldom attributed to the radical "new woman." This chapter also briefly examines the "dry" opponents of these devoted drinkers: the reformers and teetotalers, many of whom are depicted by Prohibition-era writers far more uncharitably than are the charming, irresponsible scofflaws.

Chapters 4 and 5 map several of the locations where many people drank and socialized during Prohibition and discuss the ways that these sites mark the literature of the age. Chapter 4, "Hidden in Plain Sight: The Drinking Joints," explains the origins of and distinctions among relatively public places such as speakeasies, roadhouses, and cabarets—locations

where people could drink, for the most part, unmolested by law enforcement officials. Speakeasies adorn the pages of much Prohibition-era fiction, peeping from Harlem alleyways in Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho* and from the streets of midtown Manhattan in Parker's short stories; roadhouses hide down unmarked dirt roads in Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* and Lewis's *Babbitt*; cabarets and nightclubs glitter along Seventh Avenue in Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* and McKay's *Home to Harlem*. These locations provide writers with settings freighted with social and political meaning merely by virtue of their outlaw existence.

Chapter 5, "Let's Stay In': The Prohibition-Era House Party," examines how Prohibition transformed the simple house party into the site of some of the wildest spectacles of drunken revelry in the entire Jazz Age. With the aid of helpful bootleggers and the participation of anywhere from a handful of close friends to a mansion full of strangers, hosts and hostesses opened their homes to both quiet, private transgressions against the liquor laws and full-scale bacchanals that rivaled the festivities at the most ostentatious cabarets. The sophisticated, upscale cocktail parties depicted in Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned* and *The Great Gatsby* and in Countee Cullen's *One Way to Heaven* (1932) provide revealing counterparts to the simultaneous desperation and celebration of the Harlem rent parties described in Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry . . .* and *Infants of the Spring*. Most debauched, scandalous, and thrilling of all are the scenes describing the "good-time flats" in McKay's novel *Home to Harlem*.

One final note: the novels and short stories included in *Spirits of Defiance* represent a wide range of American literature; the categories often used to differentiate discrete areas of literary study (southern, African American, modernist, realist, feminist, etc.) have not proven particularly useful constructs for this project. National Prohibition was, indeed, a truly national situation, and while this legislation certainly did not affect every individual in the same way, its far-reaching effects permeated everyday life throughout the nation. Separating authors based on their geographic backgrounds, their race, their gender, or their style of writing misses the point: writers of every stripe wrestled with the contradictions and consequences of National Prohibition. The writers discussed in this book, like their fellow citizens in general, offered no single overriding response to the Eighteenth Amendment; Americans spoke not with one voice about how best to address the issue of alcoholic beverages, but rather with a cacophony of many disparate voices. Thus, it seems fitting that the authors included in *Spirits of Defiance* be allowed to speak for themselves, to articulate their own attitudes toward National Prohibition, and as a result help readers learn to appreciate the many ways their fiction absorbed, interpreted, and reflected the powerful cultural influence of National Prohibition.

AFTERWORD

The Legacies of National Prohibition in American Literature

Prohibition will work great injury to the cause of temperance. It is a species of intemperance within itself, for it goes beyond the bounds of reason in that it attempts to control a man's appetite by legislation and makes a crime out of things that are not crimes. A prohibition law strikes at the very principle upon which our government was founded.

—Abraham Lincoln, 1840

When Abraham Lincoln, a lifelong teetotaler, spoke these words as a member of the Illinois state legislature, he anticipated exactly the sort of political backlash that National Prohibition would create eighty years later. Unfortunately, when the Eighteenth Amendment was sent to the states for ratification, no prophet stood up to warn, as historian Herbert Asbury puts it, of “the illicit breweries and distilleries, the bootleggers and the speakeasies, the corruption of police and judiciary, the hijackers and their machine guns, the gang wars, the multimillionaire booze barons, the murders and assassinations, the national breakdown of morals and manners, and all the rest of the long train of evils” that would result from National Prohibition (“The Noble Experiment” 34). While it is overly simplistic to blame Prohibition alone for all these social ills, federal attempts to eliminate drinking undoubtedly did great harm to the temperance cause, as measured both by statistical studies that charted increased drinking among certain sectors of the population, and by anecdotal evidence that suggested drinking became, to many, a much more desirable behavior after it was outlawed. But even more importantly, by making, as Lincoln put it, “a crime out of things that are not crimes,” National Prohibition damaged Americans’ faith in their government to such an extent that even now, generations later, that faith has not completely recovered. The Twenty-first Amendment, which repealed National Prohibition in December 1933, may have reopened the breweries, distilleries, and bars, but it did little to

restore Americans' confidence that the federal government could be relied upon to look after the private lives of its citizens wisely and fairly.

In 1920, shortly after Prohibition went into effect, Senator Morris Sheppard of Texas, a politician instrumental in the drafting of the Volstead Act, boasted that "there is as much chance of repealing the Eighteenth Amendment as there is for a hummingbird to fly to the planet Mars with the Washington Monument tied to its tail" (Asbury, *The Great Illusion* 316). Although this comment seems laughable today, Sheppard's opinion, generally speaking, reigned as the prevailing wisdom of the 1920s. No constitutional amendment had ever been repealed, and that precedent was enough to convince most Americans that amendments, once ratified, become permanent legal fixtures. Thus, the Prohibition-related literature produced during the so-called dry decade reveals how Americans lived under an unpopular law that nearly everyone believed would, for better or worse, endure.

National Prohibition cast a long shadow over many works of American fiction published during the 1920s and early 1930s, influencing them in ways that are rarely identified or acknowledged by readers or critics. But the influence of National Prohibition on American literature certainly did not subside with repeal; indeed, in the years immediately following repeal, many writers continued to wrestle with the implications and consequences of Prohibition. For example, although novelist and short-story writer John O'Hara knew of Prohibition's imminent repeal as he wrote *Appointment in Samarra* (1934), the psychological and political landscape of 1930 proved to be an irresistible background to his story of corruption, alcoholism, and desperation. The novel tells the bleak story of the selfish and self-destructive Julian English, a wealthy member of the fashionable set, and the ruthless bootleggers and gangsters who control his small Pennsylvania town of Gibberville. Illegal liquor saturates the lives of nearly all the characters; Julian's alcoholism is only one manifestation of the narrator's observation that "everyone was drinking, or had just finished a drink, or was about to take one" (7). Julian's encounters with the bottom of the bottle increase when the Great Depression hits, and his inevitable suicide offers a revealing comment on how drinking adversely affected the confident men of the post-World War I generation.

John O'Hara was only one of many American authors who revisited the culture of Prohibition in their stories of flappers, bootleggers, and the Jazz Age in the years immediately following repeal. The year 1934 also saw the publication of Langston Hughes's short story "Why, You Reckon?" in which a young black Harlem resident convinces another black youth, the narrator, to help him rob a rich white nightclubber on his way into an expensive Prohibition-era cabaret. The two boys jump a well-dressed

young white man, drag him into a furnace room, and demand that he hand over his wallet and empty his pockets. Hughes's most interesting comment comes at the end of the story, however, when the first mugger absconds with the loot and leaves the narrator alone with the shoeless and coatless white man, who responds to the robbery by saying, "Gee, this was thrilling! . . . This is the first time in my life I've ever had a good time in Harlem. Everything else has been fake, a show. You know, something you pay for. This was real." The story ends with the white man standing in the snow in his stocking feet, calmly hailing a downtown taxi, and the bewildered Harlem narrator wondering to himself, "What do you suppose is the matter with rich white folks? Why you reckon they ain't happy?" (71). Clearly, critical portrayals of white incursion into black nightspots did not cease just because Prohibition came to an end.

William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dorothy West, Carl Van Vechten, Dashiell Hammett, and Dorothy Parker, among many others, continued to focus on the people and places that Prohibition engendered in their fictional works published in the 1930s, 1940s, and in some cases even later. The genres of gangster fiction and crime fiction that became popular after Prohibition also owe their existence, in some measure, to the groundbreaking fiction of the 1920s in which mob bosses and bootleggers figured prominently. To cite a more recent example, Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* (1992), set in Harlem during the 1920s, is replete with references to Prohibition culture. It seems likely, though, that writers who did not directly experience National Prohibition, such as Morrison, would portray this era of American history rather differently in their fiction than would those who actually lived through the era of speakeasies, bootleg liquor, and revenue agents. This line of questioning would undoubtedly prove fruitful for scholars interested in the literary legacy of the Eighteenth Amendment.

While the deep psychological aftershocks of World War I and the explosion of new technologies irrefutably contributed to the development of a modern American literature, the controversial "liquor problem" and the nation's ensuing lawlessness also helped to shape the evolution of American letters during the years of Prohibition. Unfortunately, National Prohibition is seldom indexed in critical studies of American fiction of the 1920s, and it is rarely cited as a contributing force in the evolution of post-World War I literature. Despite its marginal presence in literary studies of fiction written between 1920 and 1933, however, Prohibition exerted a tremendous influence on how American writers conceptualized transgression, rebellion, morality, and even modernity itself. In doing so, National Prohibition stamped its indelible cultural mark on some of the greatest works of American literature.

Notes

Notes to Introduction

1. "Bone-Dry Literature Coming," *Wall Street Journal* (April 15, 1919): 9.
2. "Must We De-Alcoholize Literature? How Shakespeare, Rare Ben Jonson, Robert Burns, and Omar Khayyam Will Sound if They Are Revised to Fit Those Sober Days Soon to Come," *New York Times* (March 16, 1919): 77.
3. "Prohibition Won't Produce Great Literature, Quiller-Couch Replies to a Teetotaler," *New York Times* (March 17, 1922): 1.
4. *New York Times* review of *If Today Be Sweet* by Ednah Aiken (November 11, 1923): BR8.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. James B. Morrow, "Prohibition Law Will Be Rigidly Enforced," *Boston Daily Globe*, January 4, 1920.
2. See especially Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Elizabeth Stevenson, *Babbitts and Bohemians: From the Great War to the Great Depression* (1967; New York: Macmillan, 1998); and Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (1931; New York: Harper & Row, 1964).
3. The "Talk of the Town" section of the *New Yorker* often carried information about the illegal liquor economy; for examples see the issues dated 9/10/27, 9/26/25, 12/26/25, 1/2/26, 1/16/26, and 2/6/26 (among many others).

Notes to Chapter 2

1. "A Novel of the Southern Mills," *New York Times* (September 25, 1932): BR7.
2. See, for example, Joseph R. Uργο, "Proletarian Literature and Feminism: The Gastonia Novels and Feminist Protest," *Minnesota Review* 24 (Spring 1985): 64–84, esp. 71–73.
3. Louis Kronenberger, "Sherwood Anderson's Story-Telling Art," *New York Times* (April 23, 1933): BR6.
4. John Chamberlain, "Dostoyevsky's Shadow in the Deep South," *New York Times* (February 15, 1931): 9.
5. William Faulkner, letter dated September 14, 1950. In *William Faulkner, Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), 209.

6. "Harvard Warns Bootleggers to Keep Clear of Dormitories." *New York Times* (January 9, 1925): 19.
7. "Only Suckers Work," *American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1940*, June 14, 2004. <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>>.
8. "Murdered by Bootleggers" advertisement for the *Ladies' Home Journal*. *New York Times* (June 1, 1923): 23.
9. "Only Suckers Work," <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>>.
10. George Schuyler and Theophilus Lewis, "Shafts & Darts: A Page of Calumny and Satire," *The Messenger* 7.8 (August 1925): 295.
11. According to Fisher's "Introduction to Contemporary Harlesemese," a glossary included at the back of the novel, *dickty* is an epithet that means "a high-toned person." As an adjective, *dickty* usually appears in a negative, sarcastic context.
12. Izzy and Moe were beloved figures of the Prohibition age, and a number of histories and essays chronicle their remarkable careers. Some of these sources include Edward Behr, *Prohibition: Thirteen Years That Changed America* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996), 154–57; John Kobler, *Ardent Spirits: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (1973; New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 294–300; and Herbert Asbury, "The Noble Experiment of Izzy and Moe," *The Aspirin Age, 1919–1941*, ed. Isabel Leighton (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), 34–49.
13. Mencken, H. L., "A Moral Tale," *The Nation* 133 (September 23, 1931): 310.
14. Stanley Walker, *Books* (September 13, 1931): 1.
15. *Christian Century* 48: 1145 (Sept. 16, 1931).

Notes to Chapter 3

1. John F. Carter, Jr., "'These Wild Young People' by One of Them," *Atlantic Monthly* 126 (September 1920): 301–4.
2. In 1925 alone almost 4,200 people died from drinking tainted liquor, tens of thousands of people were blinded each year from poisoned drink, and in 1930 more than fifty thousand people were stricken with a paralytic condition called "jake leg" after drinking a medicinal extract of Jamaican ginger. See John P. Morgan and Thomas C. Tulloss, "The Jake Walk Blues," *Old Time Music* 28 (Spring 1978): 17–25.
3. Of course, not every young person in the United States shared these views. Many teenagers raised in more conservative areas of the country or in very traditionalist homes surely believed that drinking alcohol was unwise or even sinful, and that drunken peers were cause for pity and not admiration.
4. F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Simon and Schuster: 1989), 25–47.
5. F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Jelly-Bean," *Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, 142–58.
6. F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Winter Dreams," *Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, 217–36.

7. A hairstyle popular in the early 1920s in which long braids were coiled into two buns that rested just behind a woman's ears, in the fashion of Princess Leia in the original *Star Wars* movie. The "cootie garage" was soon supplanted by the ubiquitous bob.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. The conclusions drawn from this study seem reasonable and are corroborated by a number of other examinations conducted by various researchers and interested parties. But at bottom, the numerous statistical studies of American drinking habits, conducted before, during, and after the years of Prohibition, indicate only that no definitive numbers exist that accurately describe the consumption of alcohol in this country. Conclusions drawn from these studies vary as widely as their foci, and while nearly all of them purport to demonstrate how American drinking increased or decreased as a result of Prohibition, the fact is that none of them can, with any real degree of proficiency, prove anything absolutely. No study could have possibly estimated the volume of liquor smuggled, stolen, or produced illegally in the country, nor could any study take into account the truthfulness of various interviewees regarding their own illegal drinking habits. Thus the statistics regarding drinking habits are inherently flawed. Anecdotally, evidence generally suggests that some people (such as urban working-class men) drank somewhat less because of Prohibition, while others (such as women and college students) drank somewhat more. See also Murdock (94).

2. "Vice Report Scores Dance Hall Evils," *New York Times* (May 21, 1930): 23.

3. Babbitt's experience in the speakeasy would have indicated to readers that Sinclair Lewis himself knew his way around a speakeasy; indeed, like so many other revered American writers of the 1920s, Lewis suffered from debilitating alcoholism.

4. Other public venues in the 1920s also afforded women opportunities to push the boundaries of female propriety, including dance halls and amusement parks. For more extended discussions of these entertainment venues, see John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), especially 145–86; and Randy D. McBee, *Dance Hall Days: Intimacy and Leisure Among Working-Class Immigrants in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

5. "Enright Lectures Vice Squad: Thinks Some Are Grafting," *New York Times* (February 26, 1924): 1, 4.

6. "Night Clubs Found Chief Vice Centres," *New York Times* (October 14, 1929): 1.

7. W. F. White, review of *The Walls of Jericho*, *New York World* (August 5, 1928): 7m.

8. Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), in

Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, N.C., & London: Duke University Press, 1994), 89–90.

9. This commercial liquor was commonly called “bottle in bond” or just “bond” whiskey, from the distillers’ term “bottled in bond,” which indicates 100 proof whiskey that has been aged under government supervision for at least four years.

10. “Calls Night Clubs Rendezvous of Vice,” *New York Times* (July 15, 1927): 6.

11. W. E. B. Du Bois, Review of *Nigger Heaven*, *The Crisis* 33 (December 1926): 81.

12. W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Du Bois Literary Prize,” *The Crisis* 39.4 (April 1931): 137.

13. Van Vechten defines “creeper” in his “Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases,” included at the end of *Nigger Heaven*, as “a man who invades another’s marital rights” (285).

14. Leon Coleman also notes that in 1927 the African American revue *Blackbirds* incorporated a cabaret scene inspired by Van Vechten’s novel, and in 1928 a popular song called “Nigger Heaven Blues” was published. See Coleman (124).

15. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Harlem,” *The Crisis* 34.7 (September 1927): 240.

16. White Rock was a popular soda manufacturer in the 1920s, mostly known for its club soda and ginger ale. In this context “White Rock” probably refers to club soda.

17. Chandler Owen, “The Black and Tan Cabaret—America’s Most Democratic Institution,” *The Messenger* 7.2 (February 1925): 97, 100.

Notes to Chapter 5

1. “Drinking Accessories,” *New Yorker* 5 (December 14, 1929): 102.

2. Qtd. in Paul A. Carter, *Another Part of the Twenties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 88.

3. By comparison, one study in the late twenties estimated that families in white working-class neighborhoods paid about \$6.67 a room. See Osofsky (136).

4. The slang term *ofay* (or *fay*) was often used by African Americans to refer to a white person.

5. Byrd, “Harlem Rent Parties,” <<http://lcweb2.10c.gov/ammem/>>.

6. According to Bruce Kellner’s *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary for the Era*, “Mose” was a slang term for a black person and was considered derogatory when used by a white person.

7. Byrd, “‘Slick’ Reynolds,” <<http://lcweb2.10c.gov/ammem/>>.

8. Niggerati: a term coined by Zora Neale Hurston to describe the black literary circle that she and Thurman were a part of in 1920s Harlem. This term figures prominently in Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring*, in which the boarding house where the black literati live is dubbed “Niggerati Manor.”

9. This benefactor may be based in part on Charlotte Osgood Mason, the white patron of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston.

10. Byrd, “Bernice,” <<http://lcweb2.10c.gov/ammem/>>.

11. Another variety of Prohibition-era good-time flat was the “barrelhouse flat,” a favorite nightspot for men to drink and gamble. Named for the makeshift bar that would be set up using a plank laid across two or more whiskey kegs, barrelhouse flats were essentially a continuation of the pre-Prohibition saloon. Overwhelmingly masculine, these flats would sometimes forego an official bartender and instead encourage paying guests simply to dip their own cup into the whiskey barrel. Prostitutes would sometimes gather at barrelhouse flats, just as they did at workingmen’s saloons before Prohibition, and the back rooms that were not reserved strictly for gambling would sometimes be used for sex. A barrelhouse flat differed from buffet flats in that the primary focus at the former was gambling and sex was incidental; the reverse was generally true of a buffet flat. See Oliver (150–52).

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