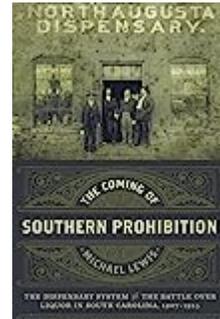


**Michael Lewis.** *The Coming of Southern Prohibition: The Dispensary System and the Battle over Liquor in South Carolina, 1907-1915.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016. 312 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-6298-9.



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## South Carolina's Slow Evolution to "an impractical ... ideal"

In 1893, Ben Tillman's Baby, the South Carolina Dispensary, went into operation. Governor Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina instituted this state monopoly as a compromise between prohibitionists and anti-prohibitionists. Believing that making the state completely dry was unrealistic, the South Carolina chief executive overruled many on both sides who disliked the dispensary idea before it even began. By restricting sales to state-operated liquor shops, Tillman thought it would reduce liquor consumption while providing much-needed tax revenue for the state. However, the dispensary was plagued by corruption throughout its decade and a half before legislators abolished it in 1907. For the next eight years, South Carolina allowed local option for each county to decide on permitting liquor sales or not. With this as the background, Michael Lewis's study centers on the ebb and flow of local option with particular attention paid to North Augusta and Aiken County.

Lewis provides the most complete picture to date of how a rural county like Aiken, unlike most in South Carolina, chose to allow liquor sales. Although religious

leaders publicly condemned the liquor trade, businesses and local politicians convinced enough of the electorate to support liquor sales for eight years following the end of the state dispensary. The tax revenue generated from sales not only provided increased funding for its poor schools and inadequate road systems but also reduced residential taxes. This seemed to outweigh the moral argument that liquor consumption debased the families of many whose husbands and sons drank to excess. But this revenue argument failed in most rural counties in South Carolina. Lewis's explanation is that tax revenues were not significant enough to persuade voters outside Aiken.

While North Augusta and its liquor shops are important to the study, its neighbor across the Savannah River, Augusta, Georgia, is crucial to the story as well. When Georgia voted to go dry in 1907, Augusta, a major commercial and industrial center saw its hundreds of saloons go out of business when the law went into effect in early 1908. Consequently Augusta residents became a new source of revenue for liquor sales in North Augusta. And that is how the Aiken town profited from

liquor sales over the next few years. But Augusta and many other Georgia towns found a loophole in the state law. The Georgia bill did not preclude private social clubs from providing liquor to paid members, usually from upper- and middle-class clientele. Rather than shut these down, local governments levied annual fees on these clubs, recouping lost revenue when public sales ended. But while it provided a private source of liquor to some Georgians, the working-class population found club membership fees too high so they traveled across the river to buy their liquor in North Augusta.

Lewis also shows how the few wet counties in South Carolina profited elsewhere from the dry counties they bordered. Likewise wet counties in other southern states took advantage of profiting from dry counties they were next to. As Lewis concludes his study, he paints a broader picture of the prohibition versus liquor revenue camps in the rest of the southern states. Indeed until 1913-14, the need for revenue often overcame those who argued for strict prohibition. Even though states such as North Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee voted to prohibit liquor sales between 1908 and 1909, it became apparent that illegal shops made it impossible to stop the liquor trade. Thus states took practical approaches as Georgia had to take advantage of liquor sales, legislating license fees on private social clubs. State laws against liquor sales were often ignored, especially in urban centers. Local law enforcement did not support the state laws, and consequently without state law enforcement the illegal liquor trade could only be blunted by taxing the social clubs. In one example to illustrate this contradiction Lewis examines the illegal activity evident in Tennessee. However, neither its legislature nor its supreme court did anything in its 1911 session to curtail illegal sales.

But the landscape for prohibition enforcement began to change in 1913 when Congress passed the Webb-Kenyan Act. This act made liquor sales across state lines illegal and, according to Lewis, encouraged the prohibition forces to redouble their efforts to institute strict

prohibition. Temperance groups in South Carolina were also aided by the ironic fact that even as more counties in the state had gone wet in 1913, the tax revenue collected from liquor sales declined for many wet counties, including Aiken. When prohibition forces managed to have a state-wide referendum in 1915, the dry forces significantly defeated the wet forces of the state. Similar measures occurred across the other southern states, closing social clubs and interstate commerce of liquor. Lewis illustrates nicely how this change occurred over eight years but leaves me questioning the deeper motives behind this rather sudden change in the electorate's attitude toward liquor sales. A deeper investigation of class differences over liquor consumption is in order. And what effort was made by the leaders of the dry forces to suppress votes from working-class people in mill towns of the upstate and midlands of South Carolina? Or did the dry forces convince many to support prohibition? There may not be answers to these questions but they need further exploration.

In conclusion, this study offers a detailed examination of a puzzling aspect of prohibition. The author relies heavily on newspapers for his analysis, which is appropriate to a point. However, I am troubled that the governor's papers in South Carolina, especially for Coleman Blease (1911-15) and Richard Manning (1915), were apparently not consulted (they do not appear in the bibliography). More investigation of prohibition and anti-prohibition leaders would have also improved the overall study. Although footnote 18 (p. 277) states that few papers of the South Carolina Anti-Saloon League have survived, I wonder if further investigation into the archives at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, or Furman University in Greenville might have produced some valuable additional sources. Finally the study would have been enhanced if correspondence of people on both sides of the issue had been included to contrast their personal views with those of the published letters and editorials of the many newspapers used throughout.

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