A History of the World in Six Glasses by Tom Standage

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Introduction

Tom Standage's *A History of the World in 6 Glasses* presents world history through six beverages: beer, wine, spirits, coffee, tea, and Coca-Cola. The book's central argument is not that drinks single-handedly caused civilizations to rise and fall. Instead, each beverage became closely associated with a major historical era because its production, distribution, and social meaning reflected wider changes in agriculture, religion, trade, science, empire, industry, and globalization. By following ordinary liquids through markets and households, Standage makes large historical processes concrete. (Standage)

The original review identifies the book's accessible method and most of its historical sequence, but it incorrectly treats rum as an additional drink and describes Coca-Cola as having "no competition" after the Soviet Union collapsed. Rum belongs within Standage's broader chapter on distilled spirits, and Coca-Cola's significance lies in its connection to American mass production, marketing, military power, and cultural influence rather than the elimination of every rival. A stronger analysis should also consider the book's limitations: beverages provide a memorable organizing device, but they cannot represent every society or explain history without attention to labor, class, gender, slavery, colonial violence, and environmental cost. (Standage)

A Material History Told Through Consumption

Traditional histories often center rulers, wars, laws, and institutions. Standage begins with something people consume daily. A beverage requires raw materials, knowledge, labor, containers, transport, regulation, and social customs. It can reveal who controls land, who performs work, which groups can afford luxury, how governments collect taxes, and how communities define identity. (Standage)

The six-glass structure gives the book narrative clarity. Beer accompanies early settled agriculture; wine represents Mediterranean culture; spirits connect oceanic expansion with slavery and revolution; coffee symbolizes information exchange and the Enlightenment; tea illustrates British imperial and industrial power; and Coca-Cola becomes a symbol of the United States and twentieth-century globalization. The epilogue turns to water, suggesting that access to safe water may define future political and humanitarian conflict. (Standage)

Beer and the Beginnings of Settled Life

Standage begins in Mesopotamia and Egypt, where grain agriculture supported urban life. Beer was not simply a modern recreational drink transported into the ancient world. Early beer was often thick, cloudy, nutritious, and consumed through straws that helped filter residue. Fermentation could make a beverage safer than contaminated surface water in some circumstances, although it would be too simple to claim that all ancient people drank beer because water was universally unsafe. (Standage)

Beer demonstrates the connection between surplus and civilization. Cultivated grain could be stored, redistributed, taxed, and converted into bread or beer. Administrative records from Mesopotamia document beer rations, showing how institutions compensated workers and organized production. The drink appeared in ritual, mythology, hospitality, and ordinary nutrition. Standage uses it to illustrate how settled communities created occupational specialization and political hierarchy. (Standage)

The argument that beer caused the agricultural revolution remains speculative. People cultivated grain for multiple purposes, and archaeological evidence does not prove one universal motive. The greater value of the chapter is interpretive: fermentation transformed perishable grain into a socially meaningful product, and beer became embedded in the economic and religious institutions of early states. (Standage)

Wine, Status, and the Mediterranean World

Wine occupies the second historical "glass." Grapevines grew especially well in parts of the Mediterranean, and wine became a commodity connecting producers, merchants, cities, and colonies. In ancient Greece, the symposium joined drinking with male elite sociability, philosophical conversation, music, and competition. The Greeks normally mixed wine with water, and the ability to drink with moderation was presented as a sign of civilization. (Standage)

Standage shows that wine encoded status. Quality, origin, age, and serving customs distinguished citizens and social classes. Greek colonization spread viticulture and drinking practices, while trade in amphorae left archaeological evidence across the Mediterranean. Wine also connected culture with exclusion: women, enslaved people, foreigners, and poor residents did not participate in elite drinking on equal terms. (Standage)

Rome expanded the wine economy on a larger scale. As Roman power spread, vineyards, roads, ports, taxation, and consumer demand integrated regions. Wine became available across classes, though type and quality continued to mark hierarchy. Christianity later gave wine sacramental importance, allowing its symbolic authority to survive the political decline of the Western Roman Empire. (Standage)

Distilled Spirits, Empire, and the Atlantic Economy

Standage’s third glass is spirits, not rum alone. Distillation concentrates alcohol by separating components according to boiling behavior. Techniques developed over centuries in medical, alchemical, and commercial settings. European expansion transformed distilled liquor into a portable commodity suited to long voyages and military provisioning. (Standage; Mintz)

Rum became particularly important in the Atlantic world because it was made from molasses, a by-product of Caribbean sugar production. Its history cannot be separated from enslaved labor. Sugar plantations generated enormous wealth through brutal systems of forced work, land seizure, and racial hierarchy. Molasses moved to North American distilleries, rum entered maritime trade, and alcohol became part of exchange with sailors, settlers, and Indigenous communities. (Standage; Mintz)

Spirits also appear in the political history of taxation. British attempts to regulate colonial trade and American federal excise taxes provoked resistance. The Whiskey Rebellion showed that the new United States had to negotiate the relationship between fiscal authority, frontier producers, and popular ideas of liberty. In this section, a drink reveals the contradictions of Atlantic freedom: revolutionary language developed within economies sustained by enslavement and dispossession. (Standage; Mintz)

Coffee and the Culture of Information

Coffee originated in northeastern Africa and became established as a beverage in Yemen and the wider Islamic world. Coffeehouses offered spaces for conversation, news, games, performance, and business. Religious and political authorities sometimes regarded them with suspicion because unsupervised discussion could challenge established power. (Standage; Topik and Wells)

When coffee reached Europe, coffeehouses became associated with commerce and intellectual exchange. Different establishments attracted merchants, scientists, writers, politicians, or investors. Lloyd’s of London, for example, developed from a coffeehouse environment where shipping information and risk were exchanged. Standage links coffee to the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment because it supported alert conversation in public spaces. (Standage; Topik and Wells)

This interpretation is persuasive as cultural history, but it can become romantic. Coffeehouses were not universally democratic. Membership, money, gender, race, and social reputation determined access. European demand also encouraged colonial plantation systems in the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia, frequently relying on slavery or coercive labor. The stimulating drink of intellectual freedom was produced through unequal global relations. (Standage; Topik and Wells)

Tea and the British Empire

Tea had an ancient history in China before becoming a defining British beverage. European trading companies imported it as a luxury, and taxation made smuggling profitable. Over time, tea became affordable to a wider public and entered daily routines across class boundaries. Sugar often accompanied it, connecting tea drinking to Caribbean plantations and enslaved labor. (Standage; Mintz)

Tea helped support industrial discipline. Factory workers could prepare it quickly, consume it during breaks, and combine caffeine with calories from sugar and milk. It did not cause industrialization, but its convenience fit the schedules of wage labor. The tea table also carried gendered meanings associated with domestic respectability and sociability. (Standage; Mintz)

Britain’s dependence on Chinese tea produced a trade imbalance because Chinese merchants had limited interest in many British goods. The British East India Company expanded the opium trade from India to China, contributing to addiction, political confrontation, and the Opium Wars. Britain later developed tea production in India and Ceylon through colonial land policies, botanical transfer, and harsh plantation labor. Tea therefore illustrates how a comforting domestic ritual could rest on imperial coercion. (Standage; Mintz)

Coca-Cola and the American Century

Coca-Cola began in the late nineteenth-century United States as a patent-style fountain drink. Its success depended less on a unique formula than on branding, franchised bottling, advertising, distribution, and the creation of a consistent consumer experience. The company sold an image of refreshment, modernity, youth, and American life. (Standage)

During the Second World War, Coca-Cola sought to make the drink available to American service members, expanding overseas bottling infrastructure. After the war, the product became associated with U.S. economic and cultural influence. In the Cold War context, Coca-Cola could symbolize consumer abundance in contrast to Soviet scarcity. The brand’s global spread made it a frequent target of criticism concerning cultural homogenization and corporate power. (Standage)

The claim that Coca-Cola became uncontested after the Soviet Union dissolved is inaccurate. It competes with Pepsi, local beverages, water, tea, coffee, juices, and changing health preferences. Its importance in Standage’s account is symbolic: it demonstrates how modern corporations standardize products while adapting advertising and distribution to local markets. (Standage)

Water as the Drink of the Future

The epilogue returns to water, the liquid required for every other beverage. Safe water is unevenly distributed, and infrastructure determines whether households receive reliable supplies. Population growth, pollution, climate change, agricultural demand, and political conflict place pressure on watersheds and aquifers. Standage suggests that water may become an organizing issue of future history. (Standage)

Water differs from the six commercial drinks because it is a basic human necessity. Treating it only as a commodity can exclude people who cannot pay, while treating access as entirely free does not eliminate the costs of treatment, distribution, maintenance, and governance. The historical lesson of the book is that control of a beverage's production and circulation produces power. That lesson becomes morally urgent when the beverage is necessary for survival. (Standage)

Strengths of Standage's Method

The book's greatest strength is accessibility. Readers can connect unfamiliar periods to recognizable objects. The six beverages create continuity across thousands of years without requiring a chronological catalogue of rulers. Standage also combines technological, economic, and cultural history: fermentation, distillation, shipping, taxation, advertising, and ritual appear within one narrative. (Standage; Mintz; Topik and Wells)

The method encourages readers to examine ordinary consumption critically. A cup of coffee contains histories of land, labor, transport, finance, and taste. A bottle of cola contains water policy, industrial chemistry, marketing, refrigeration, and global logistics. Material history shows that daily life is connected to distant institutions. (Standage; Mintz; Topik and Wells)

Limitations and Historical Silences

Any six-object history is selective. The structure privileges regions connected to Europe and the Atlantic world and gives less sustained attention to Indigenous beverages, dairy cultures, rice-based alcohols, chocolate, mate, and other traditions. The transitions between eras can appear cleaner than historical reality; beer, wine, tea, and coffee continued to coexist rather than replacing one another. (Standage; Mintz; Topik and Wells)

The book can also grant beverages too much causal power. People, institutions, technologies, and conflicts make history. Drinks are revealing evidence and sometimes influential commodities, but they do not act independently. A critical reading must foreground enslaved labor, colonial extraction, women's work, and ecological damage that can disappear behind an entertaining story of innovation. (Standage; Mintz; Topik and Wells)

Conclusion

A History of the World in 6 Glasses succeeds because it turns beverages into windows on civilization. Beer illuminates grain agriculture and early states; wine reveals Mediterranean hierarchy and culture; spirits expose Atlantic empire and slavery; coffee connects public discussion with commerce and colonial production; tea demonstrates British industry and imperial coercion; and Coca-Cola represents American corporate globalization. Water closes the argument by reminding readers that all prosperity depends on a resource distributed unequally. Standage's framework should not be mistaken for a complete history, but it offers a memorable and productive way to understand how consumption links private habits to global power. (Standage; Mintz; Topik and Wells)

References

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