

PETE BROWN



THREE SHEETS
TO THE
WIND

300 BARS IN 13 COUNTRIES: ONE MAN'S
QUEST FOR THE MEANING OF BEER

'The beer drinker's Bill Bryson' *TLS*

Three Sheets to the Wind

One Man's Quest for the Meaning of Beer

PAN BOOKS

A toast

*To Liz and to Chris,
the most considerate travelling companions.*

And to the kindness of strangers.

Three sheets to the wind – The sheet is the rope attached to the clew of a sail used for trimming sails. If the sheet is quite free to flap without restraint, the sheet is said to be ‘in the wind’, and ‘a sheet to the wind’ is a colloquial nautical expression for being tipsy. Thus to have ‘three sheets to the wind’ is to be very drunk.

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, Millennium Edition

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Chapter One

'Just the one'

London

'Fancy a pint?'

'Yeah. When?'

'Tonight? About five thirty?'

'Yeah, all right. Just the one, though. Can't be too late. Tuesday night.'

'Course not. Same here. Half five then.'

'Cheers.'

'Cheers.'

And that's how it starts.

'Fancy a pint?'

It's an innocent enough question. As invitations go, it's one of the most appealing I can imagine that involves remaining fully dressed. Every time someone asks me if I fancy a pint, it seems like a remarkably good idea, one that never loses its sheen as an original, inventive, exciting concept.

But often there's more to this little phrase than meets the ear. Usually, when we ask someone if they fancy a pint, we're asking if they would like more than one. Sometimes, the pint proposer will make this clearer by inserting an important extra word, asking, 'Do you fancy a *quick* pint?' which seems to imply that your companion only wants to spend a brief time in the pub but of course means the exact opposite.*

And there's more to 'Fancy a pint?' than traditional English understatement. One of the best running gags in *The Fast Show* was the bloke who found himself in an endless succession of crazy situations being bored to tears of futility until he eventually looks into the camera and implores 'Anyone fancy a pint?' He's asking if we'd like to join him in escaping the meaningless dirge that makes up most of our everyday lives. If you're working with someone and they suggest going for a pint, it means let's move this relationship on to a different level; let's finish with all the bullshit for today and go and speak to each other as equals, with our guard lowered. It could mean we need to talk but I don't want to make it too heavy. It can mean a good friend thinks it's about time you caught up or an acquaintance wants to talk to you about something in particular, something that requires your help or point of view, or something they think you should know about or discuss.

So when Simon, my ex-boss, phones me and says, 'Fancy a pint?' I know he's not just lonely and looking for a drinking buddy. He's a popular bloke, and if all he wanted was an escort to the pub he wouldn't have to phone me. He wants to talk to me about something. I don't know what yet, because used in this sense, 'Fancy a pint?' always carries a little bit of intrigue with it, a frisson, and that's something Simon has always been very good at building. So when I accept this particular offer, I have no reason to suspect that the first pint of this ordinary Tuesday is going to lead to an awful lot more than just a second or third. This is a pint that will have far-reaching consequences, a pint that will change my life, a pint that will cost me a lot more than the price of a late cab home.‡ But to be fair, Simon doesn't know this either. I doubt he'd have phoned if he did.

In the fifth century BC, the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu said, 'A journey of a thousand miles begins

with a single step.' I'm sure Lao-tzu would also agree that the longest pub crawl starts with a single pub. That pub is the Stabbers.

The Stabbers is one of several pubs in Knightsbridge whose main reason for existence seems to be to mess cruelly with the heads of tourists who expect every doorway on one of London's swankier streets to lead to an absolutely fabulous consumer paradise. The Stabbers isn't really called the Stabbers of course; it's got a much nicer name than that. But none of the regulars can remember what it is, even though it's written in nice gilt lettering above the door. It's nicknamed the Stabbers precisely for the worst-case scenario you might imagine. The Stabbers is the pub where the help in all those exclusive stores gather to give the servility a rest when they're off duty. In other words, it's a locals' pub, but one that just happens to be in the middle of one of the most exclusive shopping streets in the world. You can see how misunderstandings might happen. Even accounting for the decor.

The Stabbers is the kind of pub that elevates 'in need of refurbishment' from a mumbled estate agent's phrase to a bona fide interior design style. Last year it closed for several weeks, during which time the sound of hammering and sawing could be heard from within, yet when it reopened, it was exactly the same as before, down to the spirals in the carpet that may or may not have once been part of the original design.

It's dark in the Stabbers. It takes a few seconds for people's eyes to adjust from the outside. Sitting at the bar, you can watch the tourists walk in, and you can see the hope and happiness drain from their faces.

I need to stress here that neither I nor Simon drink in the Stabbers – or anywhere else in Knightsbridge for that matter – by choice. Simon works in the soon-to-be-demolished Bowater House, a 1960s office block that squats like a giant, evil spider over the entrance to Hyde Park across the road. The building is home to a group of advertising and marketing companies I used to work for, and for whom Simon still does, for the time being.

'So, are you busy?' asks Simon, returning from the bar with our second pints. (The first one went quickly while we were catching up on who's shagging who across the road – not gossiping, you understand, just catching up.)

'I am,' I nod, 'too busy. I don't have any free time at all.'

'Would you like to do some work for us?' asks Simon.

'Of course. I'd love to.'

A year ago I finished writing my first book, *Man Walks into a Pub: a sociable history of beer*. I used to work on beer advertising at the agency across the road, and my job developed into an obsession to find out more about why we drink the beer we do, the way we do. I managed to finish the book and sell it to a publisher while I was still working full time, which meant writing for a couple of hours before going to work, writing all evening when I got home, and writing all weekend for about eight months.

A few months ago the book was published. While it's never going to cause J.K. Rowling or Dan Brown any sleepless nights, it's selling better than anyone expected. I decided to give up full-time work so I could write some more without having to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner at my desk and lose touch with all my friends, but there are few writers who can make a living from writing full time, and I'm not one of them. So my new plan is to spend half my time writing, the other half as a freelance consultant to the ad agencies and clients I used to work for. It seemed like a good plan – until I developed freelancers' paranoia.

When you're working freelance, if someone offers you work, you take it. You're never offered work more than a few weeks in advance, so no matter how busy you are, you live in absolute certainty that when this contract finishes, no one is going to offer you another one. And if you are foolish enough to tell someone you're too busy, they'll have to find someone else to do the job. And then

person might be better than you, or cheaper, or tell better jokes, or buy his round more diligently, and then they'll phone him first next time they need someone and you will never work for anyone ever again.

So I'm not spending more time writing at all; I'm spending more time working. And the fact that Simon asked me for a pint to offer me yet more work is very good news indeed.

We watch an American couple laden with Harvey Nichols bags walk in and spot Smiffy and Shabby, a couple of the regulars, at the bar. They look around as if searching for someone who can offer an explanation and, finding none, they quickly turn and leave.

'We need you to go to Prague,' says Simon.

'Wow. What, on my own?'

'No, there's a few of us going. We'd like you to run a brainstorming session with us and our client over there. They sell chocolate and we're coming up with some ideas for them. We thought you'd be good as a fresh pair of eyes. Help us decide if our ideas are any good or not.'

'Sounds great,' I say. We talk through some of the details. It's sorted: we're going to Prague next week, with an overnight stay.

I've never been to Prague before. I'm thrilled to be going, but I'm also a little nervous. That might sound ridiculous, but my flash of panic when I thought Simon might want me to go to a former Soviet Bloc country on my own betrays a shameful secret for someone of my generation: I am a career traveller.

It's not that I don't want to travel and see more of the world. When Simon said, 'We need you to go to Prague,' the panic was balanced by a fleeting belief that I was James Bond, being briefed on a new mission by M. It's just that I haven't travelled much, so I remain generally incompetent at it, and I never seem to be able to get around to rectifying that.

I first really became aware of people visiting foreign places when I went to university. My new mates would spend their summers inter-railing around Europe or enrolling with BUNAC to become au-pair handlers at North American summer camps. Some went backpacking around Asia and came back wearing ethnic clothes and telling stories about Afghan tea and interesting gourds. Back home in Barnsley my old, non-uni mates, who were now working and driving cars, were going on Club 18-30 holidays to the Mediterranean. They came back with stories of the exoticism of the food, the beer, the women and, especially, the effect some of these discoveries had on the contents of their arse. Meanwhile, I passed the long summer breaks back home in a village where pit closures had removed not only most of the jobs, but also the whole point of the community, and got deservedly laughed at in Barnsley Job Centre when I asked if there were any summer jobs for students. Or I stayed in St Andrews, my university town, becoming more deeply involved in the student union and working behind the bar in our favourite pub, the Niblick, my skinny frame blissfully unaware of the impact that would ultimately have.

So I never Travelled like my friend Allan – travellers often pronounce the word with a capital T – who, after graduation, did peace studies in America during the first Gulf War, almost died of the irony, and recuperated by going to Central America to teach English, where huge floods washed his village clean away, and he had to climb trees when he wanted to go to the toilet, finding a comfortable branch at a safe height from which to do his business.

I never Travelled like my friend Alistair, who started at St Andrews after spending a year in Pakistan. The habit of haggling over everything from big scarves to the price of a pint didn't endear him to the local barmen, and he achieved the dubious fame of being regarded as tight even by his fellow Scots. After graduation he went to teach English in Cairo. Three years later, the day he left his apartment to return home, he was clearing out his room and realized that if he'd had his bed where his wardrobe had been, he'd have woken up to a view of the pyramids every morning.

I just assumed that these people could do this because they possessed skills I didn't. Skills like ~~being able to start conversations with people you don't know. Like being able to walk into a travel agent.~~ I got nervous going to visit my mate Steve in Luton. I didn't board a plane until I was twenty-two years old.

Since then I have failed to visit places like Guatemala or Mauritius, even Ibiza. I haven't trekked. I haven't backpacked. I haven't eaten anything I can't pronounce. All my travel has been strictly low case, safely looked after either by holiday reps or office PAs. I hear they don't even let you into university these days unless you've caught dysentery in Phuket or planted mango trees in Kerala. I'm just different. Small children chide me for my naivety about the world and tell me I need to get on more. To some people, Prague may be a city that was interesting ten years ago but is now a mere repository for stag and hen nights, a quick Easyjet hop for a boozy weekend. To me it's as exotic as Zanzibar.

Of course, I don't say any of this to Simon. For a responsible, professional bloke in his mid-thirties, it would be like admitting I can't drive.*

As we're finishing our second pints, Kiran and Caroline, two girls from the agency, bustle in to the pub. You can tell they're from the agency even if you don't know them, because their faces actually light up when they enter the Stabbers, Bowater House being the only place in Knightsbridge next to which the Stabbers has a nice atmosphere. It would be rude to refuse their offer of another pint.

'How's the book?' asks Kiran.

'It's all right, thanks.'

'We saw you on telly,' says Caroline. 'They called you a beer expert.'

'Can we have your autograph? Can we touch you?'

'Watch it; I'm too important now to sit here and take cheek from you.'

'We know. You're a beer expert.'

'Tell us something amazing about beer, beer expert.'

'When was beer invented?'

'Buy my book. It's in there.'

'Can't we have free copies?'

'No.'

'What's the difference between lager and bitter?'

'Buy my book.'

'Why do pubs close so early?'

'Buy my book.'

'Why do we drink pints when everyone else around the world drinks smaller measures?'

'Buy— Actually, you know what? I don't know the answer to that one.'

'What? Call yourself a beer expert?'

'No, I don't. The telly calls me a beer expert.'

'You are starting to look like a beer expert.'

'When are you going to grow a beard?'

'Are you wearing sandals?'

'That's exactly the kind of image and attitude to beer I'm trying to challenge and you bloody well know it. I'm not just talking about real ale, even though it's a fantastic drink and there's no logical reason why it's not one of the hippest drinks there is apart from that bloody neurotic stereotype—'

'He's off again.'

'Can't you ever talk about anything other than beer for more than five minutes?'

'You *asked* me about it!'

‘Yeah, but we didn’t want you going on about it all night.’

~~‘All night? What do you— Fine, let’s talk about something else. What are you working on ju~~
now apart from the chocolate?’

‘You don’t really want to know. You’re just saying that. You just want to talk about beer.’

‘I honestly don’t.’

‘Ah, the beer expert,’ announces Shabby, shuffling over to our table from his tourist-scaring position at the bar. Given that he’s been able to see me sitting here for the last hour or so, I wonder briefly why he waited until the two young women arrived before coming across to say hello.

‘Shabby was wondering,’ says Shabby, ‘what you have to do to get to be a beer expert. Because it’s about drinking a lot of it, I daresay you’re sitting on Shabby’s title.’

‘It’s more about reading about it and researching it, Shabby.’

‘So are you saying Shabby’s not a beer expert?’

Just as I’m about to attempt to leave, more old friends arrive from the agency. I start to feel control of my evening slipping away.

*

Total sobriety is not a natural human state. Throughout human history all societies, without exception, have used some form of intoxicating substance, and alcohol is by far the most common. There is evidence of beer and wine making as far back as 7000BC, and the likelihood is that it started even earlier.

Why do we drink? Simple: because it makes us feel better.

In 2002 Oxford’s Social Issues Research Centre compiled a review of over 5,000 books, journal articles, conference proceedings, abstracts and research papers, backed up by an extensive online search of university and government libraries and databases around the world, and consulted Professor Dwight Heath, professor of anthropology at Brown University. Heath has spent over thirty years researching the effects of alcohol, and acts as a consultant to people like the World Health Organization and the International Centre for Alcohol Policies.

They concluded that alcohol can make you cheerful, calm, friendly, lazy, peaceful, animated, euphoric, sentimental, generous or tender. This isn’t news; the Aztecs referred to their drink *pulque* as *centzonttochtli*, which means four hundred rabbits, a comment on the wide array of effects it could have. In countries such as the UK and the US we believe the most common effects are to make drinkers more violent or sexually permissive, but in fact, what the SIRC report shows is that by far the most common effects – anywhere – are relaxation and heightened sociability.

In the Stabbers we demonstrate this by picking on Olivia, a new arrival from across the road, and discussing how fat her neck is. Olivia has a fat neck in the same way I have a sculpted six-pack. She knows this, but it doesn’t stop her from becoming agitated and feeling the need to protest in the strongest possible terms as Fat Neck hovers around her and settles on her shoulders, her latest and only nickname until anyone thinks of a better one, or gets bored of it, whichever comes first.

Even though I’ve been protesting that I don’t really want another one thanks, it’s soon my turn to buy a large round. I phone Liz, my wife, to tell her I’ll be late home.

‘I already gathered that, lovely,’ she says. (She’s Welsh. And very understanding.)

And so we continue to drink Belgian lager, until it’s time to leave and drink Danish lager in a nearby Indian restaurant. In other words, just a typical English night out. Admittedly it’s a bit heavy for a Tuesday, but it’s little different from what millions of Brits do every week.

Soon I’ll know just how similar – and how different – it is from what our peers around the world would do in the same situation.

‘You see,’ begins Petr, leaning forward, ‘the thing about our country is this. To understand us, you must understand our sense of humour. We take nothing seriously. We make jokes about everything because we have learned that there is no point looking at the world in any other way.’

Petr is all right. I like his outlook.

‘Because if you look at the long history of the Czech people, we have been conquered and beaten and dominated by every nation and empire you can think of. We are a nation of losers. We cannot beat any country in war so as a country, we have learned not to be aggressive – there is no point. We have to be proud of something else. There was the time we beat the Russians in ice hockey to claim the gold medal in the Winter Olympics. There was much dancing and singing that night. We packed Wenceslas Square until dawn. We drank so much beer. That was a party. We showed them that we are a force that cannot be dismissed! Yes, but apart from that – the Russians though, can you believe it – we are proud of our sense of humour. We laugh at ourselves. And we laugh at everyone else.’

Petr and I are having our philosophical chat over lunch in the middle of our day-long meeting. Simon and the others from London have gone off to another room to have a side meeting. Petr is doing his best, not only to make me feel comfortable, but also to give me a crash course in understanding the nature of Czech society.

He continues, over a forkload of fried potato: ‘This is the key to understanding the Czech view of the world. We are not an aggressive people. We have learned to laugh at aggressive people.’ He pauses, and there’s the first twitch of a smile. ‘Such as you English, for example.’

Now you hang on a bleedin’ minute, pal.

Before I can retaliate – sorry, respond – Jan, who’s a mover and shaker in chocolate and gets Petr to design wrappers for him, chips in. ‘Ha, yes. The English. I enjoy meeting them on my holidays. We often go to places such as Blackpool.’

It’s nice of Jan to change the subject like this, away from something that could have turned nasty. ‘Blackpool. That’s great,’ I say with a cheesy grin, ‘I used to travel there a great deal as a child. What about Blackpool?’

‘To watch you fighting each other in the streets.’

Jan chuckles silently, pleased with himself – which is surprising given that he has a girl’s name, but I’ll wait before delivering this killer blow in our cultural debate. Petr joins in the self-satisfied chuckling. They swap a couple of quick anecdotes in Czech and laugh a little harder.

I’m in a tricky situation now. I’m the only person in the room who doesn’t speak Czech. Everyone is speaking English to indulge me. If I upset them, things could become difficult. But at the same time there’s national honour at stake. ‘Hang on though,’ I start, groping towards a defence of my countrymen. ‘I happen to know that the Czechs drink more beer than anyone else in the world, right?’ They nod. ‘And mainly it’s strong lager.’ They nod again, a little too proudly for my liking. ‘That means there must be at least as much fighting here on a Friday night as there is in England. Probably more.’

Now it’s my turn to look pleased. And I still have the girl’s name thing up my sleeve, primed.

They stop laughing and look at me, confused, as if their impeccable grasp of English had momentarily deserted them. I’ve got them. Tomas, a colleague of Jan, eventually says, ‘Pardon?’

‘Well,’ I say, ‘ask anyone in England and they’ll tell you that the main reason we fight is that we drink so much. You drink more than we do, so surely you must fight each other at least as much as we do.’

They continue to stare at me, open-mouthed, for several seconds. Then all three erupt in hysterical laughter. They swap glances and roll their eyes in a fashion which I could easily find

insulting, but I'm determined to prove them wrong about how violent we are, so instead of kicking off and teaching them a lesson (never really an option for me in any situation, if we're honest) I do that nervous thing where you kind of pretend to get the joke but make pleading faces for someone to explain it to you at the same time. This was not supposed to happen.

'Drinking beer makes you fight! That is a good one, oh yes!' Jan is almost weeping.

'Can you imagine trying to have a fight after twelve beers?' gasps Tomas. 'Right you – I'm going to fucking kill you – but just wait there a minute, I have to go to the toilet again first! Aargh *haagh!*'

This is the kind of laughter you only ever see in cartoons, laughter that makes people lie on their backs waving their arms and legs in the air, then turn over onto their stomachs and pound the floor, tears squirting from their scrunched-up faces. I didn't think real people laughed like this but Tomas is currently about one guffaw away from it – maybe as little as a chortle.

Petr is out of his chair, just about hyperventilating, doing a mime of a drunk trying to throw punches while tripping over his own jelly-legs. 'You two – stand still so I can hit you! Ahhhh ha ha ha ha ha ha hoo hoo hoo *haaaaaaargh!*'

I wait for the laughter to subside a little.

It takes a while.

I fantasize about how great it would be if I could make people laugh this hard when I'm actually *trying* to be funny.

More time passes.

'So,' I say eventually, 'you're telling me that you, the biggest beer drinkers in the world, have honestly never heard of a link between drinking and fighting?'

Tomas recovers first. 'No. Never. *Haaargh!* It's simply not possible. Alcohol doesn't make you fight. It relaxes you. *Hee hee*. Everyone knows that. And anyway, you drink to chill out and have a good time. You spend all that money getting to a state where you are happier. What would be the point of ruining it by fighting?'

And I have to admit, he has a point.

North London

'Who is the odd one out: Pink, Marc Bolan, Jimmy Somerville or Madonna?' shouts Mistress Mel.

'... so then they said English people don't fight because they're drunk, they fight because they're violent,' I say, quietly so she can't hear me.

'I don't fight when I'm drunk,' says Chris.

Chris is my best friend. He often disagrees with assertions people make as a kind of reflexive reaction. It's how he makes conversation. But this time what he's saying is also true. Chris turns into the pope when he's drunk; he starts blessing people and kissing their hands.

'Generally, I mean,' I say.

'Maybe it's my German ancestry,' says Chris, 'Maybe I'm just better than the rest of you.'

'They said the Germans are violent as well. We're warlike races.'

'No talking at the back there!' We shrink away from Mistress Mel's glare as she continues: 'Next question: in what year were the following records all top ten hits ...'

'Nineteen eighty-one,' I whisper.

'No. It's eighty-two,' says Chris.

'Do you really think we're just a bunch of frustrated yobs though? I mean, I drink nearly every day and I haven't had a fight since I decided to stop Nigel Bailey picking on me in 1982.'

'Last time I even saw a fight in a pub was that time we were watching the World Cup qualifier

must have been ninety-seven – and the Italian police were beating the shit out of the England fans on the telly and then that bloke came into the pub with a portion of chips and everyone just went to take some without thinking and they just flew up into the air and it kicked off,’ says Chris. ‘Anyway, do you know the answer to that Jimmy Somerville one or not?’

‘Haven’t a clue.’

‘I don’t know why I bring you along to this. Call yourself a beer expert?’

‘It’s a music quiz. What’s that got to do with beer? They never ask about beer. And anyway I’ll bring you along. This is my local.’

‘Tell me about it. If you’d reciprocate sometimes and come down the Dog and Bell we might bloody win something, but no. Always got to be your trendy north London pubs full of people who take this sort of thing really seriously, hasn’t it?’

‘Look who’s talking.’

I don’t know if blokes in their mid-thirties are still allowed to have best friends, but Chris and I have known each other since we were nine years old and there doesn’t seem to be much we can’t talk about it. Throughout our entire lives together he has failed utterly to hide a deeply sentimental and romantic heart under a gruff exterior that was cynical way before its time. He’s a big lad, and when he comes to our house he takes up an entire sofa, carpets the room with the day’s *Guardian*, gets over-competitive about the things he likes and takes the piss mercilessly and unrelentingly about the things he doesn’t. Until recently, no one had ever seen him and Phill Jupitus in the same room together, and even now some of our friends insist that was done with mirrors.

‘And the final question – who had a hit in 1983 with “Dolce Vita”?’

‘Ryan Paris,’ I whisper to Chris.

‘How come you know all the questions about really crap novelty records?’ he says, scrawling on the answer sheet.

‘Anyway, I don’t call myself a beer expert.’

‘You’d like to, though. Ooh, look at me; I’m a beer expert. Send me free beer.’

‘But we have got this reputation for binge drinking and causing trouble. I suppose what the Czechs are saying is that beer might be a feature, but drinking can’t be the cause of it. I mean, look at continental drinking. Whenever you see pictures of drunk people puking in the streets on a Saturday night, the papers always talk about how we should drink more like they do in France and Spain and Italy, all civilized and laid back and sophisticated. I mean, they don’t normally include the Czechs in that because the Czechs drink beer and that makes it a bit more complicated because continental drinking is always about wine. But maybe it’s the same.’

‘I thought you were supposed to know all this anyway,’ says Chris.

I thought so too.

Leaving aside the fact that I wrote a book about beer, if any nation is going to be expert on beer issues, we Brits would like to think it’s us. Beer is a cornerstone of our culture. Our real ales are the best beers in the world – surely – and our pubs set the template for global drinking culture. But the Germans, the Czechs and even the Australians claim that they teach the world to drink, and the most unlikely nation in the world – the USA – is claiming with increasing justification that it makes the most interesting beers. Britain is only the eighth biggest beer producer and on a per capita basis there are five or six nations who drink more beer than us, and that’s not counting the countries where home brew rules. Does beer mean the same to all these people as it does to us?

‘You know what you should do,’ says Chris, after filling in the guesses for all the answers we didn’t know.

‘What?’

‘You should go to this conference with Beardie.’ Beardie is our mate Steve, who writes the

science bit for *The Times Higher Education Supplement*. 'He says it's the first ever world conference on ancient and prehistoric beer. It might be all archaeological, but it is global. Start at the beginning and see if that helps you figure it out. Starting with first principles. There might be all these global beer experts you could ask.'

'Brilliant. When is it?'

'Couple of weeks, I think.'

'Right, I'm definitely going to that.'

'Definitely?'

'Absolutely.'

'Oh. OK. If you're sure.'

'Well, why wouldn't I be?'

'How's your Spanish?'

'Why?'

'The conference is in Barcelona.'

'Oh.'

And that's how it begins. I've finished the chocolate job. There's no excuse. I can't back down now. But would I have stuck to my resolve if I had known this trip to Barcelona would lead to a 45,000-mile pub crawl through more than four hundred bars in twenty-seven towns and cities in thirteen different countries on four continents? If I knew it would take me to places as far-flung and glamorous as New York, Sydney, Tokyo and Barnsley? If I knew I'd gain over a stone in weight and spend more money in less time than I've ever spent before? Me being such a crap traveller?

Of course I would.

Chapter Two

'Los Borrachos'

Barcelona

In most of the world's cities 8.30 a.m. on a Monday morning would be the height of rush hour. In Barcelona it feels like the middle of the night. The streets are deserted as Steve Farrar, science writer and beard wearer, and I head up into the Catalan hills. We feel privileged to see the city like this. The sea is a hazy liquid gold as the sun climbs above it.

The air is fresh and cool, and I've never been less excited about spending the day in a lecture theatre. But we must. We join thirty odd academics – sorry, that should read thirty-odd academics – on the implausibly beautiful campus of Barcelona University for the world's first International Congress on Beer in Prehistory and Antiquity.

Proceedings start with a panel of five academics welcoming us in Catalan. The third speaker, a crumpled man in his mid-sixties, finishes his address and promptly falls asleep while people are still applauding politely.

I wonder what makes an academic study beer, and look around the room for clues. It's quite a mix of people: there are a couple of bearded mountains dressed in black, perhaps what you'd expect a beery academic to look like; a good collection of tweedy middle-aged men, some with tidy beards, some without; but also some very young people and some very, very old ones. The programme suggests a huge array of disciplines – straightforward archaeologists, archaeo-botanists, classicists and historians. The genius of this conference is that beer spans a whole range of ways in which we seek to find out about the past. By bringing all these people together and cross-fertilizing their learning (an unappealing image if you were to see them, but bear with me) there's a chance that we could actually be pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge. When I say 'we', I do of course mean 'they'.

When the speeches in Catalan finally draw to a close, it's announced in English that we can now go and pick up our receiver units for simultaneous translation. This is not the order of events I would have preferred, but at least it's still the first morning.

The first speaker – funnily enough – addresses the conference in English. Dr Patrick McGovern is a celebrated American chemist and molecular archaeologist with a big grey beard and an easy-going manner. His first love is wine, but you can't study the origins of one drink without getting involved with others. Go far enough back, and beer, wine and mead blur into one. He tells us about beerstone, calcium oxalate. This is a yellowy solid that accrues in vessels in which beer has been kept, and can be dated. In archaeological terms this is a relatively new discovery, and it's leading to new revelations about the origin of brewing. Whereas the consensus on beer is that the earliest evidence dates from Mesopotamia at around 3000 BC, McGovern announces that his team have found traces that date back at least as far as 5400 BC.

Now, this may be the point where you and I part company and you decide that I'm just a science fanboy, but I can hardly write in my notebook with excitement. It's only the first session, and already we're rewriting the history of beer!

McGovern then shows us fragments from reliefs in the British Museum featuring people drinking wine and beer. While wine is drunk from individual containers little different from wine glasses today, beer is drunk from large communal pots through long, reed-like straws. They needed straws because the husks of the barley were still in the porridgey brew, but why big communal pots? The obvious answer, especially when juxtaposed with the wine drinkers, is that wine has always been the drink of the more affluent while beer was drunk by poorer people. But McGovern shatters this myth well. In 1957 the 2,700-year-old tomb of King Midas, or perhaps his father Gordius, was excavated in Turkey. Among the finds was the largest set of Iron Age drinking vessels ever found, many cast in bronze and gold. The long straws that people had assumed were reeds were found to be made from gold and silver, inlaid with lapis lazuli and other precious stones. And many of them had traces of beerstone. Communal beer drinking was nothing to do with economy and everything to do with sociability. The longer the straws, the more people can gather around the pot. Beer is still drunk in this way today across large parts of Africa, China and South America.

This confirms what I've always thought – beer is simply the most sociable drink there is. Drinking on your own is, at best, a bit sad. But whereas you might associate wine more strongly with meals and drinking in couples, and spirits with either greater connoisseurship or a desire to get drunker quicker, this evidence confirms that almost the whole point of beer is getting together with your mates in a relaxed, forget-your-worries, just-be-yourself manner.

The big warm glow I get from this gives me the strength to make it through the rest of the morning. As a rule, academics do not count sizzling presentation skills among their awesome talents. One after another, Spanish researchers stand up over the course of two long hours to talk about fragments of pots they have found at various sites in the Iberian Peninsula bearing traces of beerstone. No matter that they've just heard the same thing themselves three times already, each one feels the need to explain what beerstone is, why they were looking for it and why it's so amazing that they found it. People switch back and forth from carousel slides to overhead projector acetate necessitating one being switched on and the other switched off each time. They haven't rehearsed. The boredom becomes transcendental.

One thing I do take from all this is that Spain has always had a strong brewing culture. This comes as a surprise because Spain is famous for wine and sherry. It's part of that sophisticated continental cafe culture that we don't seem to have in the UK, a culture it shares with France, Italy and the rest of Mediterranean Europe. I've struggled to find an existing book on beer that even mentions the country, and most of us would struggle to name a Spanish beer brand. San Miguel, you say? No, that's a beer from the Philippines, but if it came up in a pub quiz tiebreak, I'm afraid you'd lose. It's originally from the Philippines and was first brewed in Spain in 1956. Yes, really. But in total volume terms Spain drinks more beer than any other country in Europe apart from the UK and Germany. In 1950 beer consumption in Spain was only two litres per head per year. In 2003 it had grown to seventy-eight litres, while consumption of wine had halved.

Even among those who are aware of it, the conventional wisdom is that Spain's enthusiasm for beer is relatively recent. The modern beer market is about a century old, founded mainly by German immigrants fleeing domestic unrest in the late nineteenth century. We're learning this morning that there has always been a Spanish beer culture. The Romans found it here, and the wealth of evidence from these digs shows that it was an important activity in every settled community. The Spanish Emperor Charles V (1500–58) was a beer lover. Even though this may have had something to do with the fact that he grew up in Ghent, in Flanders, that doesn't change the fact that one of his first laws was a beer purity statute, and his courtiers set up the first commercial breweries in Spain.

This is all astonishing stuff, but anyone who understands Spain properly would warn you not to be surprised by anything here. This is a country that won't be pinned down that easily. The Iberian

Peninsula ends only a few miles from the start of Africa, and is cut off from the rest of Europe by the Pyrenees. Culturally and geographically, no one would disagree that Spain is part of Europe, and Alexandre Dumas' famous declaration, 'Africa begins at the Pyrenees,' is often taken out of context. But Spain does go its own way, often confusing people who think they have its measure. During his Iberian campaign against Napoleon, the Duke of Wellington said, 'In Spain, two plus two does not always equal four.' More recently, famous British anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers added, 'Every country and society is different, but Spain is a bit *more* different.' The Spanish may not define themselves through beer the way Germans, Belgians, Danes or Czechs do, but they do drink an awful lot of it. I'm looking forward to getting out of the lecture theatre and seeing what a country looks like that drinks so much beer almost without seeming to notice.

But there's still a long time to go before that can happen. The speeches drone on. The low monotone of the interpreter doesn't help. A group that dug at the Valle de Ambrona gives us a DVD of their dig, and they seem inordinately pleased with themselves. Several people involved in the other digs seem to be getting agitated by their performance. When the session is opened up for questions the seething tension gives way to a full-blown strop. Now this is more like it! One of the other diggers deliberately misunderstands the Ambrona lot and accuses them of wrongly claiming that they have found the earliest evidence of brewing in the world. I was only half-listening to a stuttering translation, and even I know they said nothing of the sort, but this is merely an excuse for a fight which takes us all the way into lunch.

In the afternoon Max Nelson, a Canadian classicist, takes the stage. He's the first speaker not to mention beerstone. Better than that, he uses a mixture of references from Greek, Roman and northern European texts, leavened by an outrageous degree of common-sense conjecture, to suggest a wholesale rewrite of beer's story.

Beer historians usually maintain that the knowledge of brewing beer as we know it came from the Middle East into Europe via the Greek and Roman empires, or perhaps seagoing Phoenician traders. That's what I wrote in *Man Walks into a Pub*. Max Nelson says there is no actual evidence to support this. He then points out that the whole European beer tradition is fundamentally different from the historic Middle Eastern one. The Egyptians and Mesopotamians baked grain into loaves which could be stored before being used for brewing and kept beer in amphorae, clay jars. By contrast, in Europe we have always brewed using straightforward grains rather than loaves and kept beer in wooden barrels. Add in the fact that beer has always been considered a second-class beverage compared to wine – a product of Greek and Roman attitudes – and Nelson's conclusion is that beer as we know it today is the result of a direct lineage indigenous to Europe which has nothing to do with the Middle East.

This proves to be a rare highlight. Twelve hours after the opening speeches, we finally start winding up. There's an evening reception hosted by Moritz, a German-style Pilsner about to relaunch in Catalonia. Free beer no longer feels like a perk; it's a right. The first one goes down without touching the sides. Refreshed, Steve and I wander among groups of academics. They all share a deep love of beer which goes beyond their respective fields of study. Most of them brew their own. A very intense Englishwoman and an earth-mother type from Florida talk passionately about malting their own grain over open fires. For fun.

The essence of what the academics do is scenario-building: you have various fragments of evidence in place, and you use these to sketch in your best supposition of the missing details between them. The more pieces you have, the more accurate your overall picture will be. I listen to one cluster mull this over. A very distinguished-looking eastern European gentleman, whom I have so far overheard conducting fluent conversations in Spanish, French and English, nods vigorously and spits with real venom, 'Some archaeologists have too much imagination!' flicking his eyes towards Ma

Nelson as he does so. But by meeting and comparing notes across disciplines in this way, some of the gaps are being filled literally as we (all right, they) speak.

I find Jordi Juan Tresserras, one of the conference organizers, and ask him why the conference is being held in Barcelona. Is it to highlight Catalonia's undervalued role in the study of beer?

'Those guys from the Ambrona dig. They started making so much noise about what they had found. Them and their DVD. What they found was no big deal. We had found the same stuff years ago.'

I wait for him to continue, but he seems to have finished. He sees I don't quite understand.

'We wanted to set the record straight.'

'So . . . you organized the first ever conference on ancient and prehistoric beer – a global event just to sort out a rivalry between two local digs?'

'Not just two! Everybody had already found what those guys claimed was new!'

'Oh. OK.' There doesn't seem to be anything else to say.

Back in town, Steve and I meet up with Chris. I'm not ruling out the possibility that Chris's suggestion I attend this conference was more about giving him half an excuse to come to Spain than it was to sort out my beer conundrum. Over the years he has visited Spain about twelve times and has developed an insatiable appetite for its geography, its people, its art, its culture, its approach to life and especially its food and drink, which burns almost as brightly and fiercely in his heart as the crush he developed on Nigella Lawson that we started to get a bit concerned about a few years ago. In Britain many people have a particular image of Spain – lobster-pink, high rise and drunken – but the Spaniards talk about *Las Españas*. There's more than one Spain, and the one that Chris loves is the one that enchanted Hemingway and Orwell rather than good old Ryan Paris, Black Lace and Sylvie Vrethammar. He's probably been spending the day in cafes and bars pretending to be a European intellectual, or maybe just reading the paper over a beer.

We head down La Rambla, the mile-long pedestrian walkway that's the compulsory starting point for any tourist. Off to the left of La Rambla is El Barri Gòtic, Barca's old town, a maze of tiny alleyways, every now and again opening out into squares, some ornate, others run-down. You never know what you'll find around the next bend. There is a lifetime's worth of bars in here: tourist traps, excellent tapas, theme pubs and dives. It's after 10 p.m. and we need to work fast. We order our first *cervezas*.

In the global language of beer, there are essentially two different words for the beverage: *beer*, *bier*, *birra*, *birru* (Japan) and even *pivo* (central and eastern Europe) all share a common root. *Cerveza* or *Cerveja* dates back to the Roman empire. When the Romans first arrived in northern Europe they were dismissive of beer, with Caesar writing a poem in which he argued that the grain-based beverage smelled of goat, but they eventually acquired a taste for it, even building their own breweries. They regarded the beverage as a gift from Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, and ultimately came to reverence it as a potion that imparted strength, *vis*, to the drinker, so *cerevisia* was literally a gift of strength from the goddess. Praise indeed from a bunch of wine drinkers.

Every bar serves a few dishes of tapas. The local specialities seem to be crusty bread assaulted by suicidal tomatoes and green peppers known as *pimientos de Padron*. These are without doubt the highlight of any cuisine I've experienced, thanks to their sheer entertainment value. They are small, sweet and fried, served heavily salted in batches of twenty or so. But the catch is that every now and again you'll get one that's fiery hot – a chilli pepper – indistinguishable from the rest until you bite into it. Locals reckon the ratio of hot ones is about one in ten, but with the various plates we have at different bars it varies anywhere between one in five and one in twenty. Even the intensity of the heat is variable, and sometimes you can't be sure. Several times conversation is interrupted by one of

saying something like, 'I think I might have got the . . . *oh, fucking HELL!*' before urgently draining beer, eyes bulging.

The next day I rise late and realize it would be pointless to go straight back to the conference; I'd just sleep through the morning round. Steve files his copy from the hotel, and we head into town for lunch.

Just off La Rambla is the Mercat de la Boqueria, allegedly Europe's biggest food market. It's stunning to look at and almost intoxicating to be in. Several of the market stalls turn out to be bars where you sit on high stools and order beer and tapas, which are prepared inches away as you watch. The whole place is packed, but we manage to squeeze in at Kiosko Universal, a big corner stall which has draft Estrella on the bar and advertises various plates in scribbled English on blackboards above our heads. I order a plate of 'mixed fish' and watch as fresh seafood is tossed on a hotplate, squirted with lemon-flavoured olive oil and sprinkled with salt and chopped parsley. Langoustines sit twitching and waving in a bowl on the bar top in front of us. When they hit the hotplate they vainly arch their backs away from the heat, which makes me feel bad until they're put in front of me along with clam prawns, sardines and the best squid I've had in my life. I'll have another cold beer with it, thanks.

I linger at Kiosko Universal until the last possible moment, then go to face the afternoon lecture. Most of the presentations are dire, but we do learn that the cocoa plant was originally cultivated to make a form of chocolate beer, a fact that somehow has the potential to inspire new levels of unity among men and women across the world.

Finally, we're wrapping up. Despite my struggle to stay awake, it seems the conference has had way more interest than anyone expected. There is a real burst of activity in uncovering evidence of ancient brewing and replacing some of the supposition in the story with fact. There are rumblings about a follow-up conference in two years. But now it's time for the Roman Feast. This is the highlight. The university has used all its archaeological expertise to create the food and drink enjoyed here 2,000 years ago. We wander over to the courtyard to try it out.

Toga-clad staff are waiting for us and place a crown of leaves on each of our heads as we enter. We crowd around a table where an enormous array of herbs and spices is laid out. I've heard before that Roman cooking closely resembled Thai food today, and here's the proof. This selection has been assembled from old records of recipes and analysis of jars, and includes cumin, cardamom, mustard seeds, rosemary, ginger, garlic and fish sauce.

The food is laid out in terracotta dishes on a bright red tablecloth, looking simultaneously familiar and alien. Menus handed to us on scrolls tell us that we're looking at 'toasted chickpeas, hard-boiled quails' eggs seasoned with oil marinated in salt of Apicius, fragrant cheese sauce, olive pâté with aromatic herbs, pumpkin with 'seasoning common in ancient Rome' and bread, accompanied by re-created ancient beer, mead and wine.

The ancient beer is served flat and cool and has an earthy aroma, something musty and a bit dead like a damp cellar. But after a few sips it's not as unpleasant as I first thought. It's very easy to believe that this is what people were drinking two or three thousand years ago; different from beer today but recognizable as beer nevertheless. It's a satisfying moment, here in the middle of a beer quest across Europe, to go back through time as well, right to the beginning.

Suddenly there's a commotion at the entrance to the courtyard. A second later a hundred middle-aged women, none of whom have ever been inside the conference lecture theatre, fill the space. As they sidle up to the table, pause, then on some invisible signal attack. The plates of quails' eggs are grabbed and stripped in seconds. This is a clever strategy – the quails' eggs are the only items served on individual plates. Once they've seized these, they have a surface on which to pile up the other delicacies originally intended as finger food, to be grazed at gently. But these women are professional buffetologists, and they're too clever for that. Armed, they fan out around the table.

I hover behind the advance party, one row back from the spread. They don't seem to be in a hurry to move on, and it gets quite physical. Middle-aged Catalan women tend to be quite short and stumpy, and they use this to their advantage. They must be the spouses of the academics (though they all are, the evidence suggests Catalonian professors are allowed two wives each) and some knowledge of ancient crafts seems to have rubbed off on them, such as how barbed arrow-and-spearheads work. With their low centres of gravity and sharp minds, they dart in under your shoulder then inflate, sticking out their elbows to prevent you getting past them, fastening themselves in place while they gorge. Consequently, despite having been here first, I remain one row back as rank after rank zips under me, until the table has been stripped bare.

The harpies disappear as quickly and strangely as they arrived, leaving me to attempt to put the meal together from the dregs in the overturned bowls. The few bits I salvage are delicious. A very elderly academic glares at me with pure hatred and disgust over his full plate, which one of the harpies must have got for him. I have no idea what I'm doing to upset him; my conference badge is clearly visible so I have as much right to the food as he does, which is more than can be said for the harpies.

There are a few clumps of academics left, but they are starting to drift off. Those that remain are deep in highly specific conversations about smooth malting floors, or oxalate, or seed distribution, and there isn't much room for a generalist, especially one with a notebook and camera.

And there the evening's story could have ended. It so nearly does, and possibly should have. Just before I leave I decide to grab one more mug of beer, just to see if I can figure it out. It's a *Sliding Doors* moment: in one reality I drift back to the hotel, have a beer or two with Chris and am in bed around one-ish. In another I'm in La Raval, a district on the east side of La Rambla which was described by Jean Genet in the 1920s as 'a multitude of dark, dirty, narrow streets' where 'no one would have dreamed of cleaning his room, his belongings or his linen'. It doesn't seem to have changed a bit. In a dilapidated square that hasn't seen pavement cafe culture for a long time, amid a smattering of glum-looking prostitutes, stands Bar Marsella, a shabby, unassuming place that was once the haunt of Genet himself. Its speciality was and still is locally made absinthe.

The bar itself is suffused with a fiery glow that radiates from every surface. Ornate chandeliers hang low from a patched-up, mottled ceiling which hasn't seen fresh paint for at least fifty years. Century-old whisky and gin bottles sit in padlocked, mirror-backed cabinets around the room. One wall is dominated by an ancient mirror painted with an ad for *absenta*, and for the first time I make a connection between absent and absinthe. I've never had absinthe before, but this seems like the perfect place to give it a try.

I'm with Chris, Max Nelson the American classicist, a giant Swedish medieval historian and home brew freak, a mad Mexican doing a PhD in York and a pair of unlikely looking Irish field archaeologists who introduce themselves as Declan and Billy. They're here filming the conference, finding out more about beer because they just may have found evidence of brewing in Ireland that predates any yet found in northern Europe. But they each have a sardonic gleam in their eye that makes me wonder if they're not conducting some kind of blag or reality TV wind-up.

Half of us are still wearing our laurel wreaths, and some of us seem a little too attached to them. Absinthe and ancient beer combine to powerful effect, and soon it's two thirty and we're in the square outside a bar quickly pulling down its shutters and sliding bolts across its doors. Billy decides to go to sleep on a filthy mattress in the street while those of us with cameras take pictures of him with an eerie sense of calm purpose. The Swedish giant strides off towards his hotel. Billy and Declan insist that Chris and I come to Galway so they can 'get us pissed in the west of Ireland', and finally understand what makes such a diverse collection of academics come together to study beer.

'Course, this is not proper Spanish drinking,' says Chris as we trudge back to our hotel.

'What? What do you mean?'

‘I mean, I love Barcelona, but the bars close early compared to other places, and they don’t offer free tapas. No, if you want to see real Spanish drinking we need to go to Madrid.’

‘Why didn’t you say that?’

‘I just did.’

‘I’d better phone Liz and tell her I’ll be late home then.’

Madrid

I’ve decided that the key to beating this crap traveller thing is to recognize that cities are like dogs: you have to show them who’s boss at the very start of your relationship. If the city owns you, you lead a confined existence within it. This is what happened to me when I travelled on business: you’re sealed off in an environment of airport–taxi–hotel–taxi–restaurant–taxi–hotel–taxi–office–taxi–airport. You never really *connect* with the city.

But if you take on the city and face it down at the start, if you show you’re not scared, it rolls over and opens itself up to you. The best way to do this, I now realize, is to use public transport. The metro gets you right in at the same level as the locals, forces you to interact with them, and gives you a rough idea of the city’s layout and where you are within it. By the time you’ve completed your first journey, you feel like you know the ropes.

Chris looks at me pityingly when I propose this. ‘I just thought we’d get the metro to the hotel because it’s cheaper,’ he says. ‘It’s only Madrid, not bloody Bogota.’ And he stomps off to the ticket machine.

If you were here about 500 years ago, you would have thought this was the last place on earth to build a great city. We’re on a 650-metre-high plateau 300 kilometres from the sea, in a place that endures scorching summers and freezing winters. But if you were King Felipe II, you would have seen things differently. Spain is about twice the size of the UK, and this spot is its geographical centre. Felipe moved the royal court here in 1561, and caused a capital city to be custom-built around him. In a country obsessed by regionalism, he was making a strongly worded statement about unification, centralization and strong leadership. Look at a map of Spain now, and all the main roads radiate out from this central hub.

We find our hotel in a busy street just south of the city centre and almost get no further. Next door to an unassuming-looking tapas bar nestles a narrow kebab shop, spit turning behind the counter, and I’m just searching for the right comment when I spot a gleaming silver beer font on the bar counter. In design, the best ideas are often the simplest, and this is no exception: a kebab shop that sells draught beer. I become emotional, and start looking for an estate agent.

Chris pulls me gently away, and we stop for lunch in the Plaza Puerto del Moros (Gate of the Moors), a nearby square dominated by a massive sixteenth-century church flanked by fields of outdoor cafe tables. It’s just midday, and we feel a little odd after a bone-jarringly early start this morning, but a quick look around the busy square reveals that 90 per cent of the cafe patrons are sipping *cañas*, small glasses of beer. It would be rude not to join them.

Spain is still fiercely regional in its outlook. The country is divided into seventeen *autonomías*, each with its own government, budget and cultural ministry. And many of them have their own beer. Ask for a beer in southern Spain, and you’ll simply be given a Cruzcampo. Ask for the same in the north, and you’ll get a San Miguel. Over in Catalonia, it’s Estrella Damm. Here, it’s Mahou. Red and white signs advertising the brand perch outside the door of almost every bar in Madrid. I’d hazard that there’s not a great deal of difference between the beers, but fierce brand loyalty is another expression

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