

Firebrands: The Untold Story of Four Women Who Made and Unmade Prohibition

Gioia Diliberto

University of Chicago Press (Oct 30, 2024)

Hardcover \$30.00 (336pp)

978-0-226-81967-9

Gioia Diliberto's *Firebrands* visits the Roaring Twenties and beyond, revealing how four women's efforts shaped the course of American history.

When American women won the right to vote in 1920, some politicians assumed they would vote as a bloc. The story of how Prohibition rose and fell shows this to be untrue: some women upheld banning alcohol as a feminist move that would be the salvation of women and children, while others opposed the ban as an unenforceable hypocrisy. By tracing the lives of four women at the center of these debates, Diliberto shows how women were always central to one of the largest shifts in the nation.

Ella Boole led the Women's Christian Temperance Union, influencing presidents and delivering speeches about the evils of alcohol. Mabel Wilker Willebrandt was a pioneering lawyer, charged with enforcing the legal branch of Prohibition. Texas Guinan was a hustler and speakeasy host whose capers kept her in the public eye while she eluded the law. Pauline Sabin was a wealthy activist who leveraged her power, and the new ability of women to vote and organize, to see Prohibition to its grave.

Though each woman occupied her own sphere of society, not encountering the others often, their combined efforts expose the conflicting undercurrents of US society at the time: the nation was rife with racism left from the Civil War and Jim Crow, ongoing arguments about federal versus state rights, and the continuing discussions of women's places in society. Excerpts from diaries, letters, public speeches, and newspapers are used to construct a compelling account of how Prohibition came to be—and of the thirteen-year-long shadow it cast on commerce and crime.

Set against a familiar backdrop of flappers and mobsters, *Firebrands* retells history anew, demonstrating the crucial contributions women made to a fascinating time in the US.

JEANA JORGENSEN (November / December 2024)

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