

book review**Roll the Bones: The History of Gambling**

By David G. Schwartz. (2006/2007). New York: Gotham,
ISBN 1-592-40208-9 (hardcover),
ISBN 1-592-40316-6 (paperback).
Price: \$37.50 CND or \$30.00 U.S. (hardcover);
\$18.00 U.S. (paperback)

Reviewed by William R. Eadington; Professor of Economics;
Director, Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming;
University of Nevada, Reno. eadington@prodigy.net

Gambling researchers tend to be very much focused on the here-and-now. It often seems that the entire gambling world began in our lifetimes, or certainly within the time frame between the first third of the 20th century and the present. This sense of currency is reinforced by the new casino centers—Las Vegas, Macau, Atlantic City, Indian Country, Biloxi, Singapore—and by the new technologies that characterize so much of this quarter trillion dollar a year global industry: electronic gaming devices, internet gaming and wagering opportunities, televised Texas Hold ‘em tournaments, office betting pools, and multi-state and multi-country lotteries with payouts in the tens or hundreds of millions of dollars, pounds, or euros.

But the reality, as the clichés often state, is that gambling has been around as long as humankind. *Gambling is the second oldest profession. Dice were found in the tombs of the ancients. Roman soldiers cast lots for Jesus’ garments at the foot of the cross.* Gambling, it seems, has had a role in virtually every civilization, from the earliest of times. It is sometimes important to be reminded of this reality. *Roll the Bones: The History of Gambling* does just that.

One has to be either a very ambitious young scholar—or Mel Brooks—to set out to write the History of the World of anything from the beginning of time to the present. But that is essentially what David Schwartz has done with *Roll the Bones*. In light of his style and productivity (this is his third book in four years) Schwartz clearly falls into the former category. Furthermore, on occasion, he does a good job at emulating Mr. Brooks as well.

From archaeological digs in Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt where primitive dice and other gambling paraphernalia were to be found, to the modern casino and pleasure palaces of the Wynn, The Venetian, Caesars Palace, MGM Grand, and cyberspace—where millions of consumers test their luck and take their chances every day—Schwartz takes the reader on a breathtaking journey of the world of gambling. The book is filled with anecdotes of great wins and losses; famous winners and tragic losers; morality tales involving bad endings; encounters with scoundrels, cheats, victims, mobsters, entrepreneurs, and degenerate gamblers of various shades; detailed descriptions of games, wagers, and the tools and implements of gambling; and brief visits to romantic, mundane, and predatory gaming venues over the centuries (e.g., in 18th century London, gambling clubs along Piccadilly and St. James Streets were referred to as “hells.” The more down-market gambling clubs to be found elsewhere in London were called the “lower hells.”)

Like an extended Grand Tour with Schwartz as tour guide, *Roll the Bones* escorts the reader throughout Europe in centuries past to such noteworthy venues as Venice, London, Paris, Monte Carlo (“A Sunny Place for Shady People”), Baden-Baden, Bath, and Spa; to pre-colonial America, New York City and the Old West; to Australia, China, Korea, Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan. After a whirlwind description of emerging casino and gambling industries that have sprung up by the beginning of the 21st century in virtually every corner of the world, Mr. Schwartz brings the journey to an end in the current-day United States.

The book is rich in detail, short on generalizations, and nearly void of moralizing. Nonetheless, vestiges of all the modern debates on whether gambling should be legalized can be found herein. After scanning this history, one cannot deny the inherent popularity of the various “sporting” activities; the allure of gambling’s “forbidden pleasures”; the substantial capital investments and economic stimulation that mercantile gambling has fathered; or the tax revenues and economic rents that governments or opportunistic officials (such as Voltaire) captured, legitimately or otherwise, from gambling schemes. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the price often paid in terms of lives ill-spent; the obsessive grip that gambling has commanded over its less fortunate victims, including the damage done to many households’ financial stability; and the compromises of principles and ethics that have occurred in and around gambling activities over the ages.

Discussions about the origins of dice, cards, and other gambling devices comprise a significant part of various chapters, as do descriptions of many key players in the gambling world such as bookmakers, card sharks, riverboat and other professional gamblers, shrewd business people, grifters, mathematicians, and advantage players. Schwartz notes the important link between unsuccessful dice wagers by the Chevalier de Méré and the origins of modern probability theory by Pascal and Fermat; the less important invention of the sandwich, put together to satisfy the hunger pangs of the Earl of Sandwich who could not otherwise be distracted from the gambling tables to take a more traditional meal; the origins of modern casino marketing—and lobbying for legal status for casinos—exercised by François Blanc in Bad Hamburg and later in Monaco in the mid-19th century; and the links of sports gambling to “fixes” and scandals as illustrated by Arnold Rothstein and the Black Sox scandal of 1919.

All in all, this is a well-researched, well-written, and entertaining tour of the world of gambling, providing a broad—but sometimes rushed—sweep of history of this absorbing activity that has never been fully acceptable, but nevertheless has had an important presence in the lives of many individuals and societies. Like so many of the characters that have famously engaged in gambling, the activity itself has always had the reputation of being roguish, seldom respected and accepted in proper circles, but nonetheless too intriguing and visible to be ignored. And like the bastard nephew who shows up at the family wedding and demands to sit at the bridegroom's side at the reception dinner, gambling continues to push for a respected position at the table. But, as history has illustrated time and again, the activity can continue to shock and titillate from generation to generation, regardless of its legal status. This is something we should all keep in mind as we try to monitor its course for the future.

This article was not peer-reviewed.

Competing interests: None declared.