

## Women and Drink in Edwardian England

David Wright and Cathy Chorniawry

Volume 20, Number 1, 1985

Montréal 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030935ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/030935ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0068-8878 (print)

1712-9109 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Wright, D. & Chorniawry, C. (1985). Women and Drink in Edwardian England. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 20(1), 117–131. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030935ar>

### Article abstract

In Victorian England excessive drinking was seen as almost exclusively a male problem, but around 1900 the issue of female intemperance began to be widely discussed. In the first years of the twentieth century concern about women's drinking habits was voiced by an otherwise disparate group which included temperance workers, eugenicists, social reformers, imperialists and members of the medical profession. It is by no means certain that women were in fact using and abusing alcohol to a significantly greater extent than before: the evidence was and remains inconclusive. The Edwardian outcry against female intemperance derived its intensity less from the known dimensions of the problem than from the broader concerns of the time. Foremost among these were doubts about Britain's economic and imperial future, fears that her urban-based population was in the process of physical decline, and uncertainties in the face of challenges to traditional nineteenth-century assumptions about the place of women in society.

# Women and Drink in Edwardian England\*

DAVID WRIGHT and CATHY CHORNIAWRY

## Résumé

*In Victorian England excessive drinking was seen as almost exclusively a male problem, but around 1900 the issue of female intemperance began to be widely discussed. In the first years of the twentieth century concern about women's drinking habits was voiced by an otherwise disparate group which included temperance workers, eugenicists, social reformers, imperialists and members of the medical profession. It is by no means certain that women were in fact using and abusing alcohol to a significantly greater extent than before: the evidence was and remains inconclusive. The Edwardian outcry against female intemperance derived its intensity less from the known dimensions of the problem than from the broader concerns of the time. Foremost among these were doubts about Britain's economic and imperial future, fears that her urban-based population was in the process of physical decline, and uncertainties in the face of challenges to traditional nineteenth-century assumptions about the place of women in society.*

\* \* \* \*

*En Angleterre durant l'époque victorienne les abus d'alcool semblaient être un problème qu'on attribuait presque exclusivement aux hommes. Par contre, autour des années 1900, l'intempérance chez les femmes était un sujet dont on discutait beaucoup. Au début du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle, divers groupes tels les Sociétés de tempérance, les eugénistes, les réformateurs sociaux, les impérialistes et les médecins s'inquiètent des excès d'alcool chez les femmes. Il n'est pas absolument certain qu'à cette époque les femmes abusaient plus qu'avant des boissons alcooliques: la preuve en était et demeure non concluante. Le tollé Edouardien contre l'intempérance des femmes tire son intensité non pas tellement de l'ampleur connue du problème mais plutôt des préoccupations plus générales de l'époque. Parmi celles-ci, les plus importantes étaient les doutes face à l'avenir de l'économie et de l'impérialisme britanniques, la crainte du déclin physique de sa population urbaine et les incertitudes découlant de la contestation des positions traditionnelles du 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle quant au rôle de la femme dans la société.*

The use and abuse of alcoholic drink was a major moral, social and political issue in Victorian England. A strong temperance movement addressed itself to "the drink problem," and within this movement was a vocal, energetic and politically active prohibitionist group. Prohibitionism had some apparent near-successes in the early 1890s, but by the first years of the twentieth century it was largely a spent force,

---

\*The authors would like to acknowledge the help given by Professor Christopher Kent of the University of Saskatchewan, who commented on this paper at the Annual Meeting, and by Professor Patrick J. Harrigan of the University of Waterloo.

undermined by the general erosion of nonconformity, by electoral rejection of the cause in 1895 and by the findings of such social investigators as Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree, which made less tenable the belief that intemperance was simply the result of individual moral failure. Other suggested remedies found greater support, among them various schemes to eliminate the profit motive from the retailing of drink.<sup>1</sup> Prohibition, after all, was only the most extreme of many possible approaches, and its decline as a force reflected not a lessening of concern about the drink problem but an increasing awareness of its complexity. Among previous assumptions now reconsidered was the idea that excessive drinking was overwhelmingly a male activity, something which men did and women endured. As the twentieth century opened attention was increasingly directed to the nature, extent and consequences of the drinking done by women themselves.

Much of the new disquiet about female drinking arose out of evidence given before the 1896–99 Royal Commission on the Liquor Licensing Laws. Established originally as a concession by Lord Salisbury's Unionist administration to temperance pressure, the commission became one of the most extensive official enquiries undertaken in Britain. Twenty-four commissioners sat for nearly three years, questioned more than 250 witnesses, heard close to seventy-five thousand answers and, in addition to two final reports (majority and minority), issued nine volumes of evidence and appendices. The taking of evidence was held in public and was widely and extensively reported in the national press as well as in the various publications of the temperance movement and the licensed trade. The commission's impact on the government of the day was undoubtedly weakened by the fact that its feuding members produced two distinct and often mutually contradictory reports, with the chairman, Viscount Peel, among the minority.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, by the time the commission reported in the summer of 1899, public interest in the drink problem was probably as intense as it had ever been. A parallel study of the question, undertaken privately by Joseph Rowntree and Arthur Sherwell and published under the title of *The Temperance Problem and Social Reform*, first appeared in May of 1899, went through six editions by November, three more in the next two years, and altogether sold some ninety thousand copies.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. On the temperance movement see Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815–1872* (London, 1971); on its prohibitionist wing see A. E. Dingle, *The Campaign for Prohibition in Victorian England* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980). On Booth and on Rowntree see T. S. and M. B. Simey, *Charles Booth, Social Scientist* (London, 1960) and Asa Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree, 1871–1954* (London, 1961). On the diversification of the temperance movement in the years around the turn of the century see David M. Fahey, "Drink and the Meaning of Reform in Late Victorian and Edwardian England," *Cithara* 13 (1974), pp. 48–56.
  2. The final report of the 1896–99 commission [c. 9379] is in the British *Parliamentary Papers*, 1899, Vol. 35. For a study of reaction to the minority report see David M. Fahey, "Temperance and the Liberal Party—Lord Peel's Report, 1899," *Journal of British Studies* 10 (1971), pp. 132–59.
  3. Anne Vernon, *A Quaker Business Man: The Life of Joseph Rowntree, 1836–1925* (London, 1958), p. 134.

## WOMEN AND DRINK IN EDWARDIAN ENGLAND

In many ways the 1896–99 royal commission took a very traditional approach towards the drink problem. Its members divided along the same lines as the two main political parties over such issues as the desirability of providing for some form of local prohibition and, in particular, whether or not compensation should be provided when licensed houses were closed down on grounds of public policy. Traditional too was the emphasis on the drink problem as one relating especially to men, and indeed only four of the 259 witnesses who appeared before the commission were women. Yet many of the witnesses — including the four women — expressed their conviction that female drinking and drunkenness were on the increase, and they appear particularly to have impressed the commission's chairman, Viscount Peel. Referring back to the enquiry some two years after his work on it was finished, he told the annual conference of the Women's Union of the Church of England that "we have had some, I may say, appalling evidence of the extent to which intemperance is increasing among women."<sup>4</sup>

Peel was by no means alone in his views. Also speaking to the Women's Union, Mrs. Carus Wilson told her audience that

Unless you have taken pains to inform yourselves on the subject, you can have little idea how the drinking habit, especially secret drinking and drinking at other times than at meals, is increasing amongst our younger sisters. I say this from the testimony of doctors, clergymen, magistrates, governors of lunatic asylums, certified nurses, etc.; also from what I have seen myself at restaurants, hotels, railway bars, whilst travelling in trains and staying at country houses.<sup>5</sup>

Noel Buxton and Walter Hoare, contributors to a collection of essays on contemporary social problems by young Liberal reformers, wrote that "the use by women of the public-house is undoubtedly growing, and there is evidence of increasing female drunkenness."<sup>6</sup> Sir Thomas Barlow devoted a special lecture to the topic.<sup>7</sup> Whereas in 1899 Rowntree and Sherwell had spoken of "the much controverted question as to whether intemperance is increasing among women," by 1903 the equally judicious

---

4. Viscount Peel, *Female Intemperance: Is It Increasing?* (London, [1901]), p. 3. Arthur Wellesley Peel was the fifth and youngest son of Sir Robert. Speaker of the House of Commons from 1884 to 1895, he received the customary viscountcy on retirement.

5. Mrs. M. L. G. Carus Wilson, *The Best Methods of Promoting Temperance Among Educated Women* (London, [1901]), p. 5. As Mary Petrie before her marriage to Professor Ashley Carus Wilson in 1893, Mrs. Carus Wilson had been one of the first women to take a degree from University College, London and one of the originators of teaching by correspondence.

6. Noel Buxton and Walter Hoare, "Temperance Reform," in *The Heart of the Empire*, ed. C. F. G. Masterman, (London, 1901), p. 177. Buxton, who was primarily responsible for the essay, was a great-grandson of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton and one of the Buxton brewing family. He was later a Liberal MP and after that a minister in the two interwar Labour governments. In 1930 he became the first Baron Noel-Buxton.

7. Sir Thomas Barlow, *The Prevailing Intemperance Among Women: Its Causes and Its Remedy* (London, [1902]). Barlow was consulting physician to the royal household and to several leading London hospitals. Professor of Clinical Medicine at University College, London, he had honorary degrees from Harvard, McGill and Toronto. His baronetcy came in 1901.

Sir Robert Hunter was noting that "there seems to be a concurrence of opinion that drunkenness is on the increase among women."<sup>8</sup>

Rowntree and Sherwell, though cautious in summarizing the general state of opinion, were themselves apparently convinced that the intake and abuse of alcohol by women was on the increase. Drawing on the Registrar-General's annual return of deaths in England and Wales, they concluded that "while the ratio of mortality from alcoholic excess has increased 43 per cent among *males* during the last twenty years, among *females* it has increased by no less than 104 per cent."<sup>9</sup> These were perhaps the most telling statistics put forward at the time, and due allowance should be made for their contemporary impact, even though their precision is open to question in view of the fact that the last third of the nineteenth century saw significant changes in the medical profession's appreciation of the effects of alcohol.<sup>10</sup>

To those concerned about what they believed to be significantly increasing female intemperance, the question of how and where women drank was clearly a crucial one. Viscount Peel regarded "the excessive facilities for drink" as a major cause of the problem.<sup>11</sup> But knowledge of these facilities was often impressionistic and — given the class differences between the observers and most of those observed — inevitably incomplete. This was particularly true of the public-house. As Buxton and Hoare wryly noted,

To most of us the public-house is as little known as China, and there is perhaps no single field of life where it is so difficult to find witnesses who combine enthusiasm for the public welfare with a familiar knowledge of the place to be reformed.<sup>12</sup>

- 
8. Joseph Rowntree and Arthur Sherwell, *The Temperance Problem and Social Reform* (6th edit., London, 1899), p. 88. Sir Thomas Hunter, "The Present Position of the Licensing Question," *Nineteenth Century and After* 53 (April 1903), p. 697.
  9. Rowntree and Sherwell, *Temperance Problem*, p. 90.
  10. See Roy MacLeod, "'The Edge of Hope': Social Policy and Chronic Alcoholism, 1870–1900," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 22 (1967), pp. 215–45. The other statistics most commonly referred to were those for consumption of alcohol and for drunkenness offences. Though still significantly below the levels of twenty years before, per-capita consumption was rising slightly in the late 1890s. But no one knew then or knows now what proportion of the total consumption was by women. Drunkenness statistics, which did distinguish between men and women, are notoriously susceptible to variations in police enforcement. They showed the incidence of drunkenness offences by women to be rising perceptibly in the late 1890s, but again to be well below the levels of twenty years before. In general the drunkenness statistics tell much more about what was thought to be happening than about what in fact was happening. Two trends during the present century do seem clear, though. The overall incidence of drunkenness offences has fallen markedly and so have female drunkenness offences as a proportion of the total: from 22 to 25 per cent in 1895–1904 to 5 to 7 per cent in 1963–72. See G. B. Wilson, *Alcohol and the Nation* (London, 1940), pp. 333 and 431 and G. P. Price and G. T. Blake, *Drink in Great Britain, 1900 to 1979* (London, 1980), p. 516.
  11. Peel, *Female Intemperance*, p. 3.
  12. Buxton and Hoare, "Temperance Reform," p. 171.

What applied to middle-class men applied still more strongly to middle-class women: it was not through oversight that Mrs. Carus Wilson listed country houses but not public-houses as sources of her knowledge about women and drink.

When the public-house was studied it was usually discreetly and from outside. Lady Henry Somerset, then president of the nearly one hundred thousand strong British Women's Temperance Association, told the 1896–99 commission on 25 May 1897 that she had had one watched the previous day. It was "what I should call an exceedingly well-conducted house" in London's Oxford Street, and it was observed from 7:45 a.m. when it opened until 12:10 a.m. when it closed. During that time a total of 1,246 persons entered it: 1,050 men, 188 women and eight children.<sup>13</sup> Pub-goers in late nineteenth-century Britain were observed more closely than perhaps they knew, for Seeböhm Rowntree organized a similar (though more interesting) watch some three years later. Two public-houses in York were observed throughout their hours of opening on a July Saturday in 1900. The first, "in a slum district," was visited by 258 men, 179 women and 113 children. The second, "in a broad street on the borderline between a working-class and a wealthier residential district," was visited by 508 men, 114 women and 61 children. Counting only those adults who stayed for fifteen minutes or more (and thus presumably excluding those who came to buy drink to be consumed elsewhere and possibly by someone else), Rowntree found that women made 22 per cent of all visits to the first public-house but only 9 per cent to the second. The figures, he concluded, "point to the comparatively small amount of public-house drinking done by women in the more respectable working-class districts."<sup>14</sup>

Fifty years and more of temperance pressure in England had apparently succeeded in making many women feel that it was not respectable to be seen in a public-house.<sup>15</sup> Temperance workers claimed that the breweries (who by the end of the nineteenth century owned three-quarters of the approximately one hundred thousand public-houses in England and Wales)<sup>16</sup> were trying, too often with success, to overcome this very proper inhibition by widespread provision of bars designated for use by ladies only.<sup>17</sup> More important still, it was argued, women could drink, and increasingly were drinking, without ever going near a public house. A woman could buy drink at an alternative outlet and consume it in her own home, perhaps without even her family knowing. Those who were concerned about female intemperance therefore paid particular attention to the problem of the so-called grocers' licences.

13. Royal Commission on the Liquor Licensing Laws, Vol. III [c. 8694] in *Parliamentary Papers*, 1898, 36, p. 191 (hereafter RC on LLL).

14. B. Seeböhm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (2nd ed., London, n.d.), pp. 371–82. The first edition was published in 1901.

15. Standish Meacham, *A Life Apart: The English Working Class, 1890–1914* (London, 1977), p. 125.

16. RC on LLL, Final Report [c. 9379], *Parliamentary Papers*, 1899, 35, p. 19; Wilson, *Alcohol and the Nation*, p. 380.

17. See the evidence of Lady Henry Somerset, RC on LLL, Vol. III [c. 8694], *Parliamentary Papers*, 1898, 36, p. 185.

Though not an accurate term in a legal sense, "grocers' licences" was the phrase normally used to refer to licences taken out by shopkeepers (who were in fact mostly grocers) for the retailing of beer, or wine, or liquor, or combinations of the three. The licences had originated during Gladstone's term at the Exchequer in the early 1860s, and unlike public-house licences were not granted at magisterial discretion but could only be refused on one of four statutorily defined grounds. Whereas the number of public houses in the country was declining, the number of premises with grocers' licences was increasing. Because so many of these premises also sold groceries, they were widely regarded as especially insidious sources of temptation for women, particularly for women whose sense of respectability might keep them from entering a public house.

Witnesses appearing before the 1896-99 commission gave many harrowing descriptions of the effect of grocers' licences on women. H.M. Riley, who ran a home for inebriates in Leicester, estimated that nine out of every ten women who came to him for treatment owed their condition to the regular patronizing of shops with grocers' licenses.<sup>18</sup> James Nicol, a Rechabite who had formerly been a licensed grocer, told how he had seen women concealing liquor as they left his shop and how, particularly when it was being bought on credit, wine and liquor would be entered in the records as groceries.<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Alice Hawkes, a temperance worker who helped run a home for inebriates in a suburb of London, testified that in her experience grocers' licences enabled a woman "with a craving for drink" to indulge in it "very often without the knowledge of the members of her own household."<sup>20</sup>

One of Seebohm Rowntree's investigators in York made a particularly valiant attempt at close observation of the dealings of a licensed grocer. On a Tuesday in September of 1900 he stationed himself from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. outside a shop "in the centre of a very respectable working-class district on the outskirts of the city." The shop sold groceries but was also licensed to retail beer, wine and liquor, and the investigator managed to take up a position from which he could see in and observe whether or not the customers purchased alcohol. Of those who did sixty-one were men, seventy-nine were women and eighty-three were children. According to Rowntree, "practically all the adult people who entered were respectable working-class people."<sup>21</sup>

Just as the children were, presumably, fetching drink for their parents or for other adults,<sup>22</sup> so doubtless many of the women customers were buying it for their husbands

---

18. RC on LLL, Vol. III, p. 536.

19. Ibid., Vol. VIII [c. 9075], *Parliamentary Papers*, 1899, 34, pp. 525-7. The Rechabites were a teetotal Friendly Society. Debts incurred for alcoholic drinks were not recoverable at law.

20. Ibid., Vol. III, p. 54.

21. Rowntree, *Poverty*, pp. 389-90.

22. Perhaps not. F. G. Mackereth told the Women's Total Abstinence Union in 1910 that in some schools as many as 40 per cent of the children regularly drank alcohol. *Times*, 5 May 1910.

or for other males. But nobody knew for sure. The aspect of female intemperance that was probably the most shocking at the time was the idea that unknown numbers of otherwise respectable women were imbibing surreptitiously. There were many who shared Sir Thomas Barlow's belief that "the special feature . . . in female intemperance was secret drinking."<sup>23</sup> It was in this climate of opinion that the Unionist government in 1902 followed the joint recommendation of both of the 1896–99 commission's reports and placed grocers' licences under full magisterial discretion, though it declined to adopt the minority report's much more radical suggestion that the sale of alcohol in the same premises as other goods be prohibited.

The widespread expressions of concern about female intemperance in the first years of this century must be seen against the background of the broader concerns of the Edwardian period. The problem of the impact of drink on society took on a new urgency when in many ways the position of that society in the world itself seemed to be under threat. In a world where larger nations such as the United States and Germany were challenging Britain's once undisputed industrial supremacy, drink was seen in the context of Britain's ability to compete commercially. It was argued that excessive drinking on the part of British workers not only kept down living standards but lessened productive efficiency and made British goods less competitive in world markets.<sup>24</sup> Charles Masterman noted that "in America, which even now is seizing our place as the leader in the world's manufactures, the consumption of alcohol per head is less than half that in England."<sup>25</sup> He was echoing the comparison made two years earlier by Rowntree and Sherwell, who had gone on to warn that "either we must grapple with the forces that undermine our national strength and weaken industrial efficiency, or be content to fall behind in the struggle for commercial supremacy."<sup>26</sup>

Rowntree and Sherwell can be accused of special pleading in comparing Britain with the United States rather than with Germany. The tables which were compiled of relative national per-capita consumption of alcohol were of questionable value, but whereas they normally did show American levels well below Britain's, they also showed Germany's equalling or exceeding Britain's.<sup>27</sup> Arthur Shadwell, an accepted authority on the question of comparative industrial efficiency, acknowledged this point openly. Yet he went on to argue that, although the middle classes in Germany did consume "astounding quantities of beer and wine", the working class there was very different:

---

23. Barlow, *Prevailing Intemperance*, p. 3.

24. See A. E. Dingle, "Drink and Working-Class Living Standards in Britain, 1870–1914," *Economic History Review* 25 (1972), pp. 608–22 and J. B. Brown, "The Pig or the Stye: Drink and Poverty in Late Victorian England," *International Review of Social History* 18 (1973), pp. 380–95.

25. C. F. G. Masterman, "Realities at Home," in *Heart of the Empire*, p. 25.

26. Rowntree and Sherwell, *Temperance Problem*, p. 53.

27. See A. Th. Kiaer, "The Norwegian System of Regulating the Liquor Traffic," *Economic Journal* 9 (March 1899), p. 114.



The women do not frequent public-houses and do not take drink even when offered them; it is considered bad form. This fact has much influence on the habits of the men. I am satisfied that, as a body, German workmen drink very much less than our own.<sup>28</sup>

Shadwell conceded what many of his contemporaries did not: that a hard drinker could still be an excellent worker. When stressing the importance of a worker's home environment, however, he observed that "ill-kept homes" were much less common in the United States and Germany than in Britain, "where drunkenness and neglect are more common among women than anywhere else."<sup>29</sup>

The first years of this century saw a growing anxiety about Britain's ability to maintain her power and status in the world,<sup>30</sup> and many observers argued that Britain's alcoholic excesses threatened her imperial future even more than they did her economic competitiveness. In the debates on the Licensing Bill of 1902, Charles Tritton, a Conservative, told the House of Commons:

I am an advocate for a sober nation. I know what a sober nation means. It means less sin and sorrow, less crime and cruelty, less pain and poverty, less ruin and wreckage. It means happier hearts and homes, and it means a people more fitted to cope successfully with those imperial responsibilities which, whether we like them or not, are slowly but surely falling on this Empire.<sup>31</sup>

Very similar sentiments were put forward by Herbert Roberts, a Liberal:

We hear a great deal in these days about "Empire". There is one thing we should all agree upon with regard to that idea and ideal — an idea and ideal to which I, for one, am most favourable — and that is that true empire can rest permanently only upon superiority of race. If we are to maintain our position, is it not perfectly clear that something will have to be done to arrest the blight of the evil of drunkenness in the country?<sup>32</sup>

Both speakers were echoing the words of Lord Rosebery. Two months earlier the leader of the Liberal Imperialists had argued that true imperialism "relates not to territory alone, but to race as well" and that "a drink-sodden population . . . is not the true basis of a prosperous Empire."<sup>33</sup>

---

28. Arthur Shadwell, *Industrial Efficiency: A Comparative Study of Industrial Life in England, Germany and America* (2nd ed., London, 1909), p. 517. The first edition was published in 1906.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 511 and 456.

30. See G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency* (Oxford, 1971), chs. 1–2 and Bernard Porter, "The Edwardians and Their Empire," *The Edwardians*, ed. Donald Read (London, 1982), pp. 128–44.

31. *Parliamentary Debates*, 4th series, 105, c. 1167, 7 April 1902.

32. *Ibid.*, c. 1214.

33. Quoted in Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform* (London, 1960), p. 63.

Drink was becoming associated with the wider issues of empire and of racial fitness. From around the turn of the century onwards there were widely expressed fears that the British population was undergoing racial decay. This arose partly from the new-found confidence of genetics as a science and more immediately as a result of the supposed lessons of the Boer War.<sup>34</sup> The fears were well summed up by G.F. Shee, a supporter of Imperial Federation, when he wrote that the physical condition of the British people "is and has been for some time past deteriorating," mainly as a result of the increasing proportion of the population living in large towns and of the "unnatural and, in part, vicious pleasures" to be found there.<sup>35</sup>

Hoping to assuage such fears, Balfour's Unionist administration in September of 1903 reluctantly appointed an interdepartmental committee specifically charged to enquire into the allegations of physical deterioration.<sup>36</sup> The committee's report, published in the following summer, argued that "there are no sufficient data at present obtainable for a comparative estimate of the health and physique of the people" but nevertheless went on to consider "the causes and condition of such physical deterioration as is no doubt present in considerable classes of the community."<sup>37</sup> "Considerable classes" meant the urban working classes, and the report affirmed that their physical condition was an extremely serious problem, the result of poverty, overcrowding and the generally unhealthy effects of life in the modern urban environment. The contribution of drink was singled out for special mention. The committee concluded that "the abuse of alcoholic stimulants is a most potent and deadly agent of physical deterioration" and that, in particular, "the tendency of the evidence was to show that the drinking habits among the women of the working classes are certainly growing, with consequences extremely prejudicial to the care of off-spring, not to speak of the possibility of children being born permanently disabled."<sup>38</sup>

The committee was clearly impressed by the views put forward by medical men like Dr. Ridge, the Officer of Health for Enfield. He told the committee that in previous centuries there had indeed been many instances of drunken nations whose vitality had apparently not been greatly impaired. He attributed this to the fact that the women, the mothers of the race, had remained sober. "But," he added, "if the mothers as well as

---

34. G. R. Searle, *Eugenics and Politics in Britain, 1900–1914* (Leyden, 1976), chs. 1–4.

35. G. F. Shee, "The Deterioration in the National Physique," *Nineteenth Century and After* 53 (May 1903), pp. 797–8.

36. The background to this decision is discussed in Bentley B. Gilbert, "Health and Politics: The British Physical Deterioration Report of 1904," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 39 (1965), pp. 143–53 and in Richard Soloway, "Counting the Degenerates: The Statistics of Race Deterioration in Edwarding England," *Journal of Contemporary History* 17 (1982), pp. 137–64..

37. Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, Vol. I [Cd. 2175], *Parliamentary Papers*, 1904, 32, p. 19.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 37–8.

the fathers are given to drink, the progeny will deteriorate in every way, and the future of the race is imperilled.”<sup>39</sup>

Views like these were widely held among members of the medical profession and were often expressed vigorously. Probably the most influential study of the physiological effects of drink to appear in Britain in the early twentieth century was *Alcohol and the Human Body*, by Sir Victor Horsley and Mary Sturge, first published in 1907. Horsley was one of the most respected surgeons of his generation and Dr. Sturge was consulting physician at the Birmingham and Midland Hospital for Women. Together they wrote that

the question of maternal inebriety is one of national urgency. A community that cares for the general efficiency of its members will obviously safeguard the health of its women, inasmuch as these, from the very fact of their maternal functions, may either themselves become the resuscitating and repairing element in the race, or else may provide many of these very elements of deterioration which are so greatly to be dreaded.<sup>40</sup>

Four years later Dr. Caleb Saleeby, a cofounder of the Eugenics Society, made the point more dramatically still. In a chapter on alcohol entitled “The Chief Enemy of Women,” he proclaimed that drinking among women meant “drinking by unborn children,” and concluded by placing the issue in the context of the Yellow Peril:

The pressure of population is the irresistible force of history. It depends, of course, upon parenthood, and more especially upon motherhood and therefore upon womanhood. At present the motherhood of the yellow races is sober. If it remains so, and if the motherhood of Western races takes the course which motherhood has taken for many years past in England, it is very sure that in the Armageddon of the future, those ancient races, Semitic and Mongol, which had achieved civilization when Europe was in the Stone Age, will be in a position of immense advantage as against our own race.<sup>41</sup>

- 
39. *Ibid.*, Vol. III [Cd. 2185], Appendix 16 (12), *Parliamentary Papers*, 1904, 32, p. 729. The committee had in fact been effectively lobbied by a group of thirteen leading medical men working closely with the leadership of the country’s most influential nonprohibitionist temperance organization, the National Temperance League. This group was concerned by both the longterm degenerative effects of maternal drinking and its more immediate impact on infant mortality and child welfare. David W. Gutzke, “‘The Cry of the Children’: The Edwardian Medical Campaign Against Maternal Drinking,” *British Journal of Addiction* 79 (1984), pp. 71–84. For a study of theories of alcoholic degenerationism which concludes that “between about 1860 and 1910 . . . the bulk of the medical literature of the period implicitly or explicitly embodied many of the causal assumptions of inherited alcoholic degeneration,” see W. F. Bynum, “Alcoholism and Degeneration in 19th Century European Medicine and Psychiatry,” *ibid.*, pp. 59–70. We did not see these two papers until after we had written our own. Dr. Gutzke’s paper and ours have different starting-points, but share some similar conclusions.
40. Sir Victor Horsley and M. D. Sturge, *Alcohol and the Human Body* (4th ed., London, 1911), p. 250.
41. C. W. Saleeby, *Woman and Womanhood* (London, 1911), pp. 358 and 385.

While the opposite evolutionary argument was occasionally made, that drink was an important selective influence in the weeding out of undesirables,<sup>42</sup> this remained very much a minority view.

Drink had long been regarded as the enemy of women, but for different reasons. In the nineteenth century members of the temperance movement had tended to see themselves as defenders of women against men.<sup>43</sup> Husbands and fathers were the ones who squandered the family income on drink, who when drinking were tempted by prostitutes, and who after drinking would often come home to ill-treat their wives and children. In the early twentieth century these arguments were still made, but now they were overshadowed by the new emphasis on the direct harm that women who drank excessively were doing to themselves, to their children and to the race. A recent writer has detected in Britain in the early years of the twentieth century the emergence of "a powerful ideology of motherhood," one which, though firmly rooted in nineteenth-century assumptions about women, gave a new emphasis to the duty and destiny of women to be "the mothers of the race."<sup>44</sup> Much of the new intensity of concern about female intemperance was clearly related to this particular concept of a woman's role.

Equally clearly this concept was not one accepted by everybody, least of all by some women. The question of the rightful place of women within society was, of course, one of the most debated issues in the early twentieth century,<sup>45</sup> and not surprisingly "the woman question" had considerable impact on thinking about women and drink. At times expressions of concern about female drinking seem simply to have masked resentment that some women — and in particular some young middle-class women — were acting more like men and no longer accepting all the restrictions on behaviour traditionally prescribed for them. With obvious approval of his sentiments, Mrs. Carus Wilson told an audience of protemperance women how an officer in "one of our crack regiments," recently returned from overseas, had expressed to her his shock at finding that "the girls of the present day . . . drink sodas and whiskies nearly as much as the men."<sup>46</sup>

Without doubt there was a strong minority of middle-class women during this period not afraid to shock even officers from crack regiments. But for most women,

---

42. W. H. Champness, "Science and the Drunkard," *Westminster Review* 161 (May 1904), p. 526.

43. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians*, pp. 174–5.

44. Anna Davin, "Imperialism and Motherhood," *History Workshop Journal* 5 (1978), p. 13.

45. Among many valuable studies relating to the question are Constance Rover, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain* (London, 1967) and *Love, Morals and the Feminists* (London, 1970); Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton, N.J., 1968), esp. chs. 5–6; Brian Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (London, 1978); Suzann Buckley, "The Family and the Role of Women," in *The Edwardian Age: Conflict and Stability*, ed. Alan O'Day (London, 1979), pp. 133–43; Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1981), esp. ch. 5; and Jane Lewis, *Women in England, 1870–1950* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984).

46. Carus Wilson, *Best Methods*, p. 5.

and especially for those whose tastes and pockets did not stretch to whisky with soda water, the dilemma could be a cruel one. If a woman went to a public house to drink, her respectability could be questioned. If she drank at home, she could be accused of secret drinking. In parts of London, to be sure, there was a considerable women's pub culture, with women meeting in regular but informal groups, sometimes in pubs reserved by custom for women only.<sup>47</sup> Where this existed it doubtless provided much of the support which the male pub culture had for so long made available to working-class men.<sup>48</sup> Yet it apparently existed only in the poorer neighbourhoods of the city, and was probably not extensive outside London. For the majority of working-class women who were living above the poverty line or outside London, the answer to the dilemma was presumably not to drink at all.

Few of the observers who deplored the apparent increase in female intemperance attempted to account for it. Those who did normally pointed to the excessive facilities available for obtaining drink, which made temptation difficult to resist. Sir Thomas Barlow concisely summed up the traditional view, slightly modified in the light of the prevailing medical understanding of alcoholism, when he stated that although drunkenness could become a disease, it started as a self-indulgence. Even if heredity were a factor, he argued, "drunkenness ought to be treated primarily as a sin."<sup>49</sup> On the other hand explanations emphasizing environmental factors appear to have been gaining ground, especially with reference to women who lived in extreme poverty. "What would they do, these women," asked Robert Blatchford, "were it not for the devil's usury of peace — the gin?"<sup>50</sup>

Understanding alcohol's appeal as a temporary refuge from grinding poverty nevertheless failed to account for excessive drinking among more respectable and better-off working-class women. Seebohm Rowntree was one of the few to hint at a possible answer to this question when he remarked on "the monotony which characterizes the life of most married women of the working class." This monotony, he thought, was least marked in the slum districts, where there was a thriving female community life. However,

with advances in the social scale, family life becomes more private, and the women, left in the house all day whilst their husbands are at work, are largely thrown upon their own resources. Those, as a rule, are sadly limited, and in the deadening monotony of their lives these women too often become mere hopeless drudges.<sup>51</sup>

- 
47. Ellen Ross, "Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I," *History Workshop Journal* 15 (1983), p. 10.
48. Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians* (London, 1975), pp. 198–202.
49. Barlow, *Prevailing Intemperance*, p. 5.
50. Robert Blatchford, *Dismal England* (London, 1899), p. 22, cited in Brown, "The Pig or the Sty," p. 391. Brown analyzes "the debate over the causal relationship of drink and indigence" in the last third of the nineteenth century.
51. Rowntree, *Poverty*, p. 108.

Similar conclusions have been reached by a subsequent analyst looking back and discerning at the turn of the century “a surprisingly unhappy transition period for working-class women,” in particular for married women in that large middle group of families between the traditional poor and the artisans.<sup>52</sup> If women from this group were indeed drinking more, at least part of the reason may have been that they lacked most of the alternative leisure outlets by then available to their husbands.

When those who were concerned about female intemperance referred to the differences between men and women, however, it was most often to point to the more serious impact of alcohol upon the female constitution and temperament. “It is a lamentable fact,” asserted the 1896–99 commission’s minority report, “that when a woman becomes intemperate she seems to have less power of self-control than a man.”<sup>53</sup> Horsley and Sturge argued that alcohol generally impaired a woman’s appetite far more than a man’s and that the exhaustion which resulted in turn increased the desire for alcoholic stimulants.<sup>54</sup> Sir Thomas Barlow made the same point, and stressed that there was a further important difference. A man who drank too much would normally suffer a storm of *delirium tremens*, after which he would return to his former self. A woman, by contrast, became “irritable and flighty and fractious” and would cry at the least provocation. She “romanced, and exaggerated, and lied,” felt strange terrors and easily collapsed under stress.<sup>55</sup>

Opinions about the drink problem thus very often reflected a strongly traditional conception of women’s nature and role. They may even have strengthened it. Brian Harrison has suggested that an affirmation of domestic values against falling standards of decency helped the women’s movement in the United States but had a different impact in Britain, where it was “more central to the rhetoric of anti-suffragism.”<sup>56</sup> This certainly seems to have been the case with the female intemperance issue in Britain. Those who expressed their views on the question almost always emphasized physiological and often temperamental differences between men and women. Even when the “mothers of the race” argument was not used, there was generally still an assumption that, when it came to drinking and the drinking environment, women needed special protection. Lady Henry Somerset and Rosalind, Countess of Carlisle, were committed suffragists, normally consistent in their pursuit of female equality before the law. Yet each in turn pressed for measures to prohibit the employment of women in public houses.<sup>57</sup> Drinking habits allowable in men were seen as simply not suitable for women. Buxton and Hoare, by no means unreflecting traditionalists, nevertheless found distasteful “the phenomenon of the tidy housemaid bantering in the private bar.”

---

52. Peter N. Stearns, “Working-Class Women in Britain, 1890–1914,” in *Suffer and Be Still*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington, Ind., 1972), pp. 103 and 106 ff.

53. RC on LLL, Final Report, p. 94.

54. Horsley and Sturge, *Alcohol*, p. 158.

55. Barlow, *Prevailing Intemperance*, p. 6.

56. Harrison, *Separate Spheres*, p. 56.

57. Lady Henry Somerset in her evidence to the RC on LLL, Vol. III, p. 186; Rosalind Carlisle in a letter of 1 April 1908 to the then Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone, British Library Add. Ms. 46065, f. 208.

Conceding that "perfect sobriety is an almost invariable rule," they told their readers frankly that "what offends us is a sense of unfitness."<sup>58</sup>

Overwhelmingly, then, pronouncements about female drinking assumed what the law on divorce already assumed: that higher standards of conduct were expected of women.<sup>59</sup> Yet, ironically perhaps, one result of calling attention to the number of women not meeting these standards was to give men a legal right previously reserved to women. A section of the 1902 Licensing Act enabled either a husband or a wife, instead of just a wife, to apply for a judicial separation on the ground of the other's habitual drunkenness.<sup>60</sup> The measure, which came more than half a century too late to help Charles Dickens's Stephen Blackpool, was probably of little practical help to working-class husbands with similar problems in the early twentieth century.<sup>61</sup> The change did mark a formal ending to the assumption that a husband should invariably be able to deal with his wife's drinking without recourse to outside authority, but it certainly did nothing to erode the general consensus that excessive drinking was far more reprehensible in a woman than in a man.

Apart from the change in the law relating to judicial separation and the new conditions imposed on grocers' licences in the same act, the concern expressed about women and drink produced few immediate and tangible results.<sup>62</sup> This was not surprising. After 1895 even the Liberals, consistently the party most favourable to temperance causes, approached the drink problem with great caution: the temperance movement appeared too fragmented, the drink and public-house interest too strong and electoral opinion too uncertain.<sup>63</sup> Possibly one lingering legacy lay in making more acceptable the severe restrictions placed on the drink trade during the First World War. Otherwise the significance of the outcry against female intemperance is less in what it achieved than in its links with the wider assumptions and concerns of the time. While the work of the 1896–99 commission undoubtedly served to alert the public conscience to the problem, the response attained the intensity it did because female intemperance was perceived as integrally related to the broader issues of economic and imperial vulnerability, physical degeneration and the place of women in society.

---

58. Buxton and Hoare, "Temperance Reform," p. 177.

59. Proven and uncondoned adultery by the spouse was a sufficient ground for a man to divorce his wife, but not for a woman to divorce her husband.

60. J. Edmondson Joel, "Husbands and Wives Under the New Licensing Act of 1902," *Westminster Review* 160 (July 1903), pp. 68–76 examines the intricacies of this change.

61. Iris Minor, "Working-Class Women and Matrimonial Law Reform, 1890–1914," in *Ideology and the Labour Movement*, eds. David E. Martin and David Rubinstein (London, 1979), p. 117.

62. There was, however, further legislation in the related area of children and drink. One provision of the 1908 Children's Act excluded anyone under fourteen years of age from the drinking rooms of licensed premises. The campaign for this restriction was led by notable medical men, including Sir Thomas Barlow, by temperance workers, and by the popular journalist, George R. Sims; see Gutzke, "The Cry of the Children," pp. 74–80.

63. David M. Fahey, "The Politics of Drink: Pressure Groups and the British Liberal Party, 1883–1908," *Social Science* 54 (1979), pp. 76–85.

## WOMEN AND DRINK IN EDWARDIAN ENGLAND

Historians have differed radically in their interpretations of the temperance impulse in modern western history. Some have set it squarely within the liberal–progressive and humanitarian tradition, while others have seen it as a restrictive, antimodern force, concerned with perpetuating dominant interests and existing values.<sup>64</sup> A review of Edwardian attitudes to women and drink helps illustrate how such a dichotomy can arise. The critics of female intemperance, seeking to free women from the tyranny of drink, could justly claim to have a forward-looking and liberating cause. Yet frequently this objective was also explicitly linked to such conservative concerns as the maintenance of imperial primacy and the prevention of racial decline, and it was advanced by arguments for the most part based on uncritically traditional conceptions of the nature and role of women.

---

64. James S. Roberts, *Drink, Temperance and the Working Class in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (London, 1984), pp. 8–10.