

The Temperance Movement and Class Struggle in Victorian England

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The temperance movement was a major cause of social reform in Victorian Britain. In the eighteenth century, the English middle and upper classes religiously served and drank wine at their dinners, and the working class frequently consumed beer and cider. During the nineteenth century, however, the consumption of alcohol among working-class men began to be viewed as a wasteful and illicit form of entertainment which served no purpose, caused many problems, and was scorned and fought against by the temperance movement. The temperance movement focused on the drinking habits of men, because men drank publically and because the drinking habits of women were unknown. While its goals changed according to its respective leaders, it achieved what it originally set out to do: control drunkenness and change Victorian England's lenient treatment of alcohol abusers. Clearly, the temperance movement's main focus was working-class drinking, as the movement was dominated by middle-class men who felt that by fighting intemperance they were helping the working class. The three phases of the temperance movement, however, proved that the middle and working classes were for the most part not at all in agreement. To study the temperance movement is to study the class struggles of a society in which social status meant everything.

Representing the ideals of self-control and self-denial, the temperance movement epitomized middle-class Victorian values. The values were shaped by both Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism. <1> Both the Evangelical movement, concerned with salvation, and the Utilitarian movement, concerned with efficiency, valued selfcontrol and self-denial which directly affected the temperance movement. That one should at all times be in total control of oneself was of utmost importance to the Victorians. As Joseph Kidd, a Victorian journalist for the Contemporary Review said, "To be able to rule self and transmit to children an organization [Victorian England] accustomed to selfrestraint and moderation in all things is one of the chief delights and aspirations to the moral nature of a true man." <2> The Temperance advocates believed that anyone under the influence of alcohol was no longer in control of him or herself. They therefore concluded the perniciousness of liquor.

Furthermore, the Victorians heralded that thrift and self-denial were imperative to forming a "true man." Thus, a man who spent money on something such as alcohol was wasteful and, in effect, a failure because he did not spend his time and money in a reasonable and useful manner. They also claimed that work was the key to success and that a "true man" was always willing to work hard. Leisure was distrusted because they believed that it perpetuated laziness. A man who indulged himself in leisure was not considered a "true man," for a "true man" denied himself pleasure and practiced self-denial. Many of the temperance groups concerned with thrift encouraged working-class

men in pubs to save their money rather than spend it on drink, and also to avoid laziness and gluttony in order to be better workers. <3>

The Victorians also valued the idea of self-help, claiming that an individual grows through personal effort. For example, the mayor of Chester during the 1830's explained, "Self-help is of all help, the best because it brings with it mainly satisfaction of difficulties subdued." <4> Those who did not make a conscious effort to redeem themselves from lowly social stature and to improve their education and personal development, were labeled failures. Therefore, members of the working class were blamed for their own inability to succeed, because they remained in an undesirable position in society without striving to better themselves. Temperance was viewed as a way for these men to counter the accusation that they were lazy, and prove that they did have self respect and cared about their social status.

The temperance movement, however, did not consist of one cohesive group of nondrinkers who were in constant agreement and cooperated to achieve a common goal. Broken into three distinct phases, the temperance movement experienced many changes. All three of these greatly affected the working class. The first of these phases began in the 1830's when intemperance was beginning to be seen as a widespread problem. With the rise of industrialism, working hours became much more regulated than in the agricultural society and factory owners demanded punctual, alert and efficient factory workers. Previously, many working-class men had missed days of work due to their intoxication. However, as a result of industrialization, this sort of behavior was no longer acceptable because it hindered the work regimen of the factory. Soon, Saint Monday, an accepted day in agricultural society for men to recover from their "hangovers," became an impediment to the efficiency of the new industrial factories and was no longer observed. <5>

The organized temperance movement was brought to Lancaster and Yorkshire, the northern industrial towns, in the 1830s, by the middleclass, who felt that they were fighting drunkenness out of Christian charity. <6> The middle class, who saw intemperance as a problem solely in the working class, focused their efforts on eliminating hard liquor and sought to dramatically curb the wide spread drunkenness which plagued Victorian society. They worked with clergymen and a few upper-class reformers to help working-class men control their drinking. Their goal was to enlist the help of those who drank only in moderation, to fight against drunkenness, rather than to cure drunkards. William Collins, a prominent temperance lobbyist, explained his group's theory on membership by saying, "Drunkards we hold to be almost irreclaimable ... it is rather too late for men to become members, when they have become drunkards." <7> The temperance leaders implored social drinkers not to take a drink between meals, however, some people facetiously complained that they would overeat as a result of this rule. <8>

Furthermore, in order to set an example for the members of the temperance groups and the community at large, those who worked for the temperance movement believed that they themselves should abstain from drinking any sort of alcoholic beverage. <9> This

personal conviction was based on the message heralded by St Paul, that "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended or made weak." <10> In that age with strong Evangelical influence, such Biblical references had strong appeal and were very persuasive. Those who were strongly religious were much more apt to agree with temperance if it could be supported Biblically.

The main goal of the temperance workers, was not to outlaw drinking, but to control it. Many working-class men, however, were insulted by the temperance movement and believed that its leaders were hypocritical because they implied that the problem of drunkenness lay only in the working class. <11> They also complained that the temperance movement only diverted attention from the real problems of sanitation, overcrowding in housing developments, and discontent in the workplace. <12>

During 1830, at the beginning of the temperance reformation, twenty temperance societies were founded, totalling between two and three thousand members. The inhabitants of the cities in northern England participated the most during the beginning of the temperance movement. These cities had astounding membership in the cities of Blackburn and Manchester, where the temperance societies were very wealthy. These temperance societies held public meetings and invited only speakers whom they saw as nearly sinless to address their members and encourage them to avoid drunkenness. For example, the speech of a man invited to preach for the Leeds Temperance Society's meeting held on March 9, 1831, was so gripping that the audience did not disperse until late in the night. <13> Besides persuading them through exciting speeches, the temperance societies worked to attract members by publishing and distributing tracts, journals, and essays. They charged a fee, however, for these documents. This stipulation made them unavailable to the very group of people whom they tried to address, the poor working class. <14>

The first period of the temperance movement was focused on controlling drunkenness rather than abolishing all alcoholic beverages, and it was believed that the promotion of beer, which they were convinced was less intoxicating than the hard liquor of the working class, would provide for social drinking rather than public intoxication. The Beer Act of 1830 began forty years of the free trade of beer and enabled anyone who paid two guineas to receive a license to sell beer. It was believed that if beer was easily obtainable at an unlimited number of beer shops, people would choose to drink it rather than gin, which was seen as more destructive and which was harder to obtain. In order to further encourage the sale of beer, in late 1830, the two guinea duty for the beer license was eliminated, rendering beer even more accessible. Many working class men procured the licenses so that they could profit from the sale of beer, which was being so aggressively supported. <15>

When it became clear, however, that beer could be as equally intoxicating as the scorned drink, gin, temperance reformers realized that the Beer Act was a failure in controlling drunkenness and the second phase of the temperance movement began. Therefore, in 1832, those who fervently believed in the evil of alcohol called for an alcohol-free

society and formed a group referring to themselves as "teetotallers." This group sought to convince Victorians that any consumption of liquor was morally wrong. This alienated those of the middle-class who dominated the temperance movement during its first phase who believed in controlling drunkenness rather than abolishing liquor. Whereas the temperance movement was founded by middleclass men seeking to improve the working class, the teetotal group was founded by seven working-class men under the leadership of Joseph Livesey. <16>

Livesey and his teetotal group took a pledge, promising never to consume any alcoholic beverages. This pledge was considered the "cornerstone" of the teetotal movement. <17> Labeled the "short pledge," this pledge only required people to refrain from personal consumption. Later, the "long pledge" was introduced; this forbade anyone under the pledge oath from serving alcohol in his or her home. For the middle class, this provided serious social problems because few socialites cared to dine in someone's home and not drink wine. Also, the "long pledge" disallowed the giving or taking of sacramental wine. <18> In lieu of these strict rules, many middle-class people who supported temperance but still wished to drink wine with their dinners, were not supportive of the teetotal movement. However, women at marrying age during this period were encouraged by teetotallers and non-teetotallers alike to only marry men who were teetotal. <19>

The teetotallers' goal was to create self-respect among the working class and to encourage them to apply the ideas of Victorianism to themselves so that they might establish and strive for goals to improve their position in society and not remain idle. One workingclass teetotaler, Thomas Whittaker spoke in reference to the middleclass value of the ideal "true man," saying that teetotallers "made me feel that a man's position and success did not, after all, depend so much on his birth and parentage than on his own efforts and perseverance." <20> The "pledge" not to drink became a way for working-class men to decide their own fates by rebuilding their unions and involving themselves in the political process. <21>

Many working-class men were more eager to join the group and take the pledge, because teetotallers were a group of the working-class men for the advancement of the working class. Several of these men found it encouraging that the members of these groups were obligated to trade only within their groups thereby promoting each other's success and giving non-members the incentive to change their views and join a teetotal group. In order to enforce this policy, before each meeting, the secretary would read the names of each member and his job and skills to remind all members of whom to contact for their specific needs. <22>

Furthermore, Chartism, a working-class political movement seeking to win suffrage for working-class men, began in 1839. Because of the Chartist movement's concern for showing working-class respectability, many teetotallers quickly joined. Soon, Chartist groups were founded all over England. One working-class temperance group, the East London Chartist Temperance Association, invited many speakers to address their members. One such speaker emphasized "the necessity of the working classes abstaining

from all intoxicating drinks in order to assist themselves in obtaining their political rights." <23>

Resentment within the middle class began, as they wanted to be the leaders, not the followers, of the temperance movement. As a result, for a brief period of time, middle-class membership in the temperance movement declined. Joseph Kidd blamed the teetotallers for not recognizing the temperance workers as partners in the same goal. In an article entitled "Temperance and Its Boundaries," he wrote that, "The more vehement of the total abstinence orators try to brand the advocates of temperance as evil-doers, as half-hearted, as disguised enemies, if not false friends." He claimed that if the teetotallers were not so adamant about the total abolishment of liquor, they would find more support. <24> The teetotallers did not cease from insisting on the abolishment of liquor, however, and this led directly to their downfall.

As problems such as lack of support and funding festered, the teetotallers' movement dissipated. Due to mismanagement and lack of business skills, the working-class leaders found it difficult to keep all of the finances on track and the teetotal movement could no longer afford to continue. The frustrated leaders, unable to persuade all of Victorian England that drinking was immoral, disengaged their followers and sought to return to their private lives and concentrate on themselves. <25> Victorian journalist Charles Graham said he would "give the compulsory abstinence party [teetotallers] ... the credit at least of good intentions," after having labeled their efforts a failure saying that they were "doomed." <26>

After the failure of the teetotallers, the movement to control alcohol subsided and its advocates were no longer in the limelight. Soon, however, the middle-class sympathizers of the temperance movement proved that they were not ready to give up their fight against liquor abuse. They decided that if they could not convince drinkers to stop drinking by compelling them through morals and the idea of self-respect, they would take the cue from America. When on June 2, 1851, the State of Maine passed the first prohibition law of the west, British temperance advocates resolved to fight temperance by way of Parliament. In 1853, the United Kingdom Alliance was founded in Manchester, calling itself a legitimate political party and pledging to badger Parliament to outlaw liquor in England. So began the third phase of the temperance movement. <27> In 1874, a committee made up of members of Parliament was assigned to research the causes of drunkenness and propose a solution.

To the prohibitionists, the Victorian ideal of self-denial became irrelevant. Focusing their efforts solely on the legal aspect of temperance, they no longer cared what the consumer did, rather they cared what the vendor did. This directly affected the working class, as it strived to close the pubs and ale houses which working-class men attended. The housing conditions for the working class had not improved, but gradually gotten worse. Often working-class men would go to pubs simply because these pubs were heated and provided a warm and comfortable contrast to their uncomfortable and cramped houses. Soon, however, these pubs which workingclass men frequented to socialize, smoke, people-watch, and occasionally drink were portrayed only as places where alcohol was

consumed. Photographers took pictures only of barrels and bottles, giving pubs a bad name and indicating to society that they were detrimental. <28>

Working-class men retaliated, claiming that the middle-class prohibitionists were extremely hypocritical, as the Alliance did not require its members to take the teetotal pledge. The leader of the Alliance, Sir Wilfrid Lawson, claimed to be a teetotaler, but had a famous wine cellar. He claimed that he maintained it so that his guests would have the best treatment at his home. <29> In order to appease the working class and hoping that soon they would be supportive of their cause, many prohibitionists left the Alliance and revived the Leeds Temperance Society. They required their members to take the pledge and refrain from consuming and selling liquor.

Not much time had elapsed when Victorians began to argue about the legitimacy and feasibility of the prohibitionists' demands. Many agreed with temperance and its principles, but believed that the government should not involve itself in prohibition. They claimed that the prohibitionists were leading a direct attack on the working class. Charles Graham claimed that "the majority of the nation is opposed to the views of Sir Wilfrid Lawson and others of his school." <30> One such man, John Bright, said, "The trade of the licensed victualler is a trade that has been permitted and is now permitted and I think Parliament and the Law are not justified in inflicting upon it unnecessary difficulties and unnecessary irritation." <31> Bright continued to express his belief that temperance should be an individual's choice rather than a law enforced by the government: "Law must be founded on broad and general principles, such as are consistent with political economy, but individuals may use their own discretion as to what they abstain from, and men may persuade each other to do many things which it would not be proper for the law to compel them to do." <32>

It is precisely the idea which Bright's stand conveyed which came between the manufacturing middle class and the working class. The middle class was adamant about prohibitionism and the working class wanted the government to stay out of the temperance movement. Originally comprised of "laissez faire" liberals concerned with individual liberty, the middle class became the advocates of governmental intervention in the temperance movement. <33> Now, they were proposing and passing laws such as the Licensing Act of 1872, which drastically cut the hours which pubs could sell liquor. Again, the working class was furious, because their only places of leisure were the pubs, while the middle and upper classes had private clubs, and the middle class was trying to abolish them. <34> The Sunday Closing Movement, which demanded that the government forbid the sale of alcohol on Sundays was also unpopular to working-class men who enjoyed the time they spent in pubs. Fortunately, for them, in Britain, the Sunday Closing Act never passed.

The prohibitionists began to blame working-class men for the social repercussions of alcohol abuse. A Victorian feminist, Frances Power Cobbe, claimed that working-class men, became increasingly violent when under the influence of alcohol and that the availability of liquor, as a temptation to working-class men posed a serious threat to their wives who were frequently exposed to their husband's violent, drunken furies. <35>

Another Victorian feminist, Ethel Snowden, claimed that women married to working-class men who drank "were the greatest sufferers from the drink habit." <36>

Citing liquor as the cause of crime in Victorian England was not uncommon. For example, journalist Charles Graham expressed concern about the large amount of money Victorian England was spending on beer and spirits and about the "great amount of misery and crime caused by excessive use of these beverages." <37> Joseph Kidd went so far as to suggest that doctors physically examine all workingclass men for intemperance as they were threats and menaces to society. He also suggested that the working class was physically inferior because they drank alcohol and their bodies were poisoned by it. <38> However, one of Graham's and Kidd's colleagues strongly disagreed. Victorian journalist Charles Walker insisted that "To speak of poverty and crime as the results of the consumption of alcohol is to betray not only an unphilosophical habit of mind, but an ignorance or prejudice which is inexcusable." <39>

Sensing the animosity of the working class against middle-class prohibitionism, the middle-class prohibitionists tried persistently to win working-class support. In order to sway working-class men to prohibitionism and gain political support, new arguments against liquor were voiced. Many prohibitionists, including doctors such as Dr. Thomas Trotter, urged working-class men to refrain from drinking on the grounds that it was unhealthy and could be life-threatening. <40>

A second way in which the working class was encouraged to join the prohibitionist movement, was through the church. Whereas the earlier teetotal movement did not have direct support from the Church of England, during the prohibitionist movement the clergy began to get involved. Preachers claimed that there were two forms of life: pub life and church life. Many chapels supported local temperance societies. <41> Parishoners of churches often took pledges to refrain from drinking. When they failed to do so, others expressed their disappointment. One devout church-goer, Harriet Tyrwitt-Drake, explained that she was 11 greatly grieved ... by the failing back into drinking of many who had taken the teetotal pledge." <42> Soon, the church was so involved in the temperance movement that they began the Sunday School movement, which encouraged working-class children to attend church and learn the evils of drinking alcohol. Clergy members had their daughters sell soft-drinks to those in attendance. <43>

Regardless of their efforts, the middle-class prohibitionists did not gain support from the working class. After having passed the Licensing Act, the prohibitionists severely alienated working-class men. In a strong effort to recruit working-class supporters, the middle-class dominated political parties encouraged working-class men to join private clubs. <44> Charles Graham had written in an article in June of 1877 entitled, "Beer and the Temperance Problem," that the key to improving drinking habits of the working class was to create a "better and pleasanter place of social meeting than a public pub by allowing him [the workingclass man] the right and privilege which the rich man enjoys at his club, -the right to drink alcoholic or other beverages, or not, as it suits him, and the privilege of social intercourse without being compelled to drink to excess solely for the benefit of the house." <45>

Graham also suggested that these clubs serve food and shelve books and periodicals for its working-class members to read. Mentioning the idea of 'family nights' at the clubs, Graham explained that Victorian values must be encouraged and enforced within these clubs. The alcoholic content of beer was a major concern of Graham's, so he invented a "conversation beer," which would intoxicate the workingclass men with the desire for rhetoric rather than drunkenness. <46>

Once controlled by the social elite, by the 1880's, the maintenance of the London private clubs soon gave way to the political parties who encouraged working-class men to join. Men like William Hough claimed that "the object of the committee who had [Salford's Crescent Liberal] club was to take working men from the beer shops and provide them with healthy literature ... a healthy atmosphere." <47> Private clubs like these purchased entertaining games such as billiards and chess sets to furnish and render their clubs more appealing. They were considered to be positive arenas for the support and enforcement of temperance for working-class men. As W. H. Bailey, a manufacturer and chief benefactor of Salford's Regent Liberal Club once said, "Both Liberal and Conservative clubs had done a great deal for the promotion of temperance. A man must have the opportunity for the use of his physical, mental, and social faculties, and must have some sort of social enjoyment. These clubs offered ... the opportunity of having that social intercourse without drinking ... and enjoying themselves in a rational way." <48>

Focusing on the Victorian ideals of the "true man," prohibitionists tried to persuade the working class to accept these ideals under the premise that the internalization of them would breed success. Many prohibitionists believed that the result of spending time in these clubs would be the improvement of the working-class man's habits. C. E. Crawley, a wealthy civil engineer and member of the Conservative Party, predicted that the clubs "would have a tendency to improve the moral [and] the social conditions of young men and would lead directly to improve the condition of the working man's home." <49>

Legal suasion had not been terribly successful for the Prohibitionists and soon they resorted back to moral persuasion to win over working-class support. They used not just external control, but encouraged the internalization of Victorian values so that the workingclass man would want to remain sober and be a social and financial success. At one point, John Milne explained to the members of his town's Cutgate Liberal Club that the maintenance of their club and the encouragement of their working-class members to save their money rather than spend it on drink would lead to greater self-respect and thereby improve society as a whole. <50> The only problem with these clubs was that few working-class men could afford to join them. So, another of the prohibitionists' efforts to win over working-class support had failed.

The church retreated from the prohibitionist movement as well; when it was asked to serve only grape juice for communion, the clergy did not agree with the opinion that communion wine was evil. Gradually, one by one, the bills proposed by the Prohibitionist Party failed, and prohibitionism was labeled a failure. Charles Graham blamed their failure on the fact that they "utterly ignore, with the willful blindness common to the holders of extreme views, the chief cause of the excessive consumption of alcoholic

liquids." <51> Others claimed that they alienated the very group whose support they needed, the working class. Nevertheless, in time the efforts of the prohibitionists were futile and the last phase of the temperance movement came to a close.

The Temperance movement, as it encouraged the working class to remain sober, was seen as a way for the working class to establish selfrespectability and strive for their common goals of higher economic and social status. While the teetotal and prohibitionist movements were not successful in and of themselves, the temperance movement shaped England's view of liquor and effected change for the future. Public drunkenness was no longer tolerated and alcohol abuse was viewed not as a recreation, but rather as a social disfunction. Incorporating the ideas of Utilitarianism and Evangelicalism, the middle-class temperance advocates educated the working class of ways in which to achieve success. It can also be said that although the working class and middle class did not emerge from the temperance movement as friends, they emerged unscathed and enlightened.

Notes

1 Dr. Nancy Fix Anderson. "Victorianism." Loyola University New Orleans, 29 September 1992.

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3 Anderson, 9-29-92.

4 Lilian Lewis Shiman, *Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 9.

5 Shiman, p. 4.

6 Shiman, p. 4.

7 William Collins as quoted in Shiman, p. 9.

8 R. H. Gretton, *A Modern History of the English People 1880-1922* (London: The Dial Press, 1930), p. 641

9 Shiman, p. 10

10 St. Paul as quoted in, Shiman, p. 10.

11 Shiman, p. 17.

12 F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 321.

13 Shiman, p. 4.

14 Thompson, p. 309.

15 Thompson, p. 309.

16 Shiman, p. 18.

17 Shiman, p. 18.

18 Shiman, 22.

19 Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism* (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1987), p. 133.

20 Shiman, p. 30.

21 Thompson, p. 321.

22 Shiman, p. 33.

23 Shiman, p. 33.

24 Kidd, p.352.

25 Shiman p. 74

26 Charles Graham, "Beer and the Temperance Problem," *Contemporary Review*, 30 (June 1877): 73.

27 Shiman, p. 75.

28 Ford et al, p. 136.

29 Shiman, p. 77.

30 Graham, p. 73.

31 John Bright as quoted in Asa Briggs, *Victorian People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 212.

32 John Bright, as quoted in Briggs, p. 212.

33 Briggs, p. 212.

34 Anderson, 9-29-92.

35 Levine, p. 132.

36 Levine, p. 132.

37 Graham, p. 72.

38 Kidd, p. 357.

39 Charles Walker, "The Veto Bill," *The Fortnightly Review* 59 (May 1883): 737.

40 Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse* (New York: Longman, 1983), p. 307.

41 Ford et al, p. 91.

42 Pamela Horn, *Victorian Countrywomen*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 91.

43 Horn, p. 91.

44 John Garrard, "Parties, Members and Voters After 1867," *Later Victorian Britain*. Ed. T. R. Gourvish and Alan O'Day. (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), p. 145.

45 Graham, p. 84.

46 Graham, p. 84.

47 Graham, p. 84.

48 W. H. Bailey, as quoted in Garrard, p. 142.

49 C. E. Crawley, as quoted in Garrard, p. 143.

50 Garrard, p. 143.

51 Graham, p. 75.

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