



“The Prime Minister of the Grisly King of Terrors, Death”: Alcohol in the Nineteenth-Century Reform Imagination

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IN **REVUE FRANÇAISE D'ÉTUDES AMÉRICAINES** 2018/3 N° 156 , PAGES 44 TO 55

PUBLISHER **BELIN**

ISSN 0397-7870

ISBN 9782410014037

DOI 10.3917/e.rfea.156.0044

Uploaded: 12/11/2018

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2018-3-page-44?lang=en>



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Keywords

Temperance;
intoxication; addiction;
reform; nineteenth-
century United States

Tout au long du XIX^e siècle, l'alcool et l'ébriété qu'il suscite occupent une place de choix dans le catalogue des vices que dressent les réformateurs américains. Ministres du culte, médecins, défenseurs de la tempérance et autorités judiciaires considèrent l'ivrognerie comme le vice par excellence, comme un piège insidieux qui engendre toutes sortes d'immoralités : crime, violence (en particulier domestique), jeu, prostitution ou encore impiété. L'alcool trompe et dévoie les vertueux, les initie au vice et entraîne une chute irréversible dans la déchéance et la mort. Contrairement à d'autres formes de dépravation, l'abus d'alcool non seulement égare ceux qui ne se doutent de rien, mais empêche leur conversion, déjouant l'influence bénéfique du droit, de la moralité, de la religion et de l'affection familiale. Les réformateurs convoquent des preuves tant sociales que scientifiques : statistiques criminelles, anecdotes de violence conjugale, études de cas cliniques et analyses physiologiques. Comprendre l'idée que les réformateurs se font de l'alcool comme père de tous les vices permet d'éclairer les approches ultérieures de l'usage d'autres stupéfiants, tel l'opium, et de l'évolution du concept moderne d'addiction.

By the mid-19th century, the baleful plague of intemperance had outraged and alarmed temperance advocates throughout the Anglo-American world. Discoursing on the nature and effects of alcohol in early 1840, on a day of “simultaneous meetings” of temperance associations around the world, Vermont pastor James Nelson Hume characterized intemperance as the “tool of the Devil, and the prime minister of the grisly king of terrors, Death” (6). The “hydra alcohol,” Hume continued:

[by] infusing its venom into all the sinuosities of the heart, poisons the fountain of human sympathy and per consequence every passion exercised by a drunkard is a

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noxious emanation from a corrupted soul. The reins of self-government are violently wrested from the hands of virtue, and moral restraint no longer holds dominion. (16)

Hume's description of alcohol and its impact on the human mind encapsulates much of the nineteenth-century American temperance movement's thinking on alcoholic intoxication. In both the North and South, temperance reformers imagined minds altered by alcohol as fundamentally deranged, incapable of moral feeling, intellectual reasoning, spiritual reclamation, or human affection. They assigned no positive value to intoxication, rejecting the ancient adage, *in vino veritas*, along with arguments lauding drink as a social lubricant and font of conviviality and good fellowship. Nineteenth-century temperance reformers' demonization of drink, though ultimately rejected in the twentieth century with the failure of Prohibition, did influence modern notions of alcoholism and addiction.¹

Intemperance: The Master Vice

Like Hume, many temperance writers and orators imagined intemperance as a master vice that engendered all manner of immorality. A few examples illustrate the prevalence of this belief. In 1815, an early critic denounced intemperance as a "leading sin" and an "imperious vice" that opened the door to "a long train of evils" (Wadsworth 7, 8). The managers of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New York agreed several years later, averring that intemperate drinking, in "relation to poverty and vice, may be emphatically styled the *Cause of Causes*" (4). Even reformed inebriates themselves subscribed to this view: in 1844, a former drunkard opined, based on bitter experience, that "no other vice, perhaps, is so prolific of evil" (*Confessions* 103).

What specific crimes and moral lapses did intoxication produce? "Falsehood, profanity, lewdness, fraud, theft, assaults, dueling, and even murder," warned one cleric (Bates 9); another noted that alcohol led men to "slander and reveal secrets, and throw away property, offend modesty, and profane sacred things, and abuse nearest relatives, and cover themselves and families with infamy" (Dickinson 3). "Intoxicating liquor," Rhode Island

1. On the antebellum temperance movement, see William J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979); Ian Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979); and Scott C. Martin, *Devil of the Domestic Sphere: Temperance, Gender, and Middle Class Ideology, 1800-1860* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 2008). For the later 19th century, consult Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Liberty and Power, 1873-1900* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1981); Jack S. Blocker, Jr., *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), and Thomas R. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Battle for a Dry America, 1800-1933* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998).

temperance advocates fulminated, caused “nearly nine tenths of the crime, and at least four fifths of the pauperism” in Providence (City Temperance Society np). Others focused on the ghastly domestic violence common in drinkers’ homes, describing the “purple gore” flowing from a murdered wife, or citing the case of an inebriate who killed his wife and six children, placing one, “with his own hands, on the fire of the hearth, and kept it there, to broil to death under the eyes of its father” (Edwards 71, 66). Temperance reformers did not consciously employ hyperbole in narrating the catalogue of sins and transgressions they attributed to alcohol, for in their minds, it would be difficult to depict the true magnitude and horrors of intemperance. In the eighteenth century, Benjamin Rush, a physician and Revolutionary patriot whom reformers hailed as the father of the American temperance movement, noted that the “demoralizing effects of distilled spirits,” were like the “demoniac in the New Testament,” in that “their name is ‘Legion,’ for they convey into the soul a host of vices and crimes” (2). Later temperance advocates followed suit. “Compared with the demon of intemperance,” a Massachusetts temperance advocate insisted in the 1840s, the “mission of the demon of war to the domestic circle is an angel’s visit,” for soldiers, unlike drunkards, at least died with honor (*Address to the People of the Commonwealth* 5).

Physicians, scientists, clergy, and sundry reformers developed elaborate theories about the mechanisms by which alcoholic intoxication effected such a train of woe. Temperance advocates generally agreed that alcohol acted on the brain to suppress or destroy morality and the higher emotions while stimulating or unleashing the baser passions. Initially, alcoholic indulgence deceives the drinker, associating intoxication with “our sensual, and winding it around our social[,] feelings [...] it naturally, for the time being, increases our supposed sociability, but makes the peasant a king” (Barton 17). Soon, however, strong drink acts on the moral sense to

impair and vitiate it; analogous to physical effects upon the system in producing various diseases both of the body and mind, so does intemperance operate in impairing and destroying the moral principle of our nature, and those finer feelings of the heart, which elevate man to the rank he holds in the scale of being [...] (Hosack 7)

Simply put, intoxication “impairs the reason,” and alcoholic beverages “blunt and ultimately obliterate, the natural affections, and moral sensibilities,” (Hitchcock, *Alcoholic* 23) destroying “domestic peace and comfort” and “endanger[ing] the lives of family and friends” (*Facts to Think About* 14).

While suppressing reason and morality, temperance reformers argued, drinking heightened and amplified the baser aspects of human nature. The “passions are apt to be violent and strong in the wine drinker,” cautioned one physician, and “affections of the brain from undue excitement not unfrequently [*sic*] occur” (Sweetser 53). Intoxication “converts

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the gentleness of the lamb, into the ferocity of the tiger," declared one tract, "dethrones reason and lets loose all the bad passions to range and rage without control" (*On Intemperance* 48). Frequently, reformers conceived the debasing effects of intoxication on the human mind as the excitation of the "animal spirits to a preternatural action," (Herttell 28) with each glass "lessening the power of his moral over his animal faculties" (Barton 17). Drinking, reformers insisted, reduced human beings to the level of beasts.

Alcohol and the Brain in Nineteenth-Century Temperance Thought

Physicians and physiologists attempted to explain the dehumanizing effects of alcohol with reference to its impact on the brain. The "extraordinary condensation" of alcoholic stimulus, opined phrenologist Orson S. Fowler, was "[c]oncentrated upon the Base of the brain, powerfully stimulating the merely Animal propensities, whilst it weakens the moral and intellectual faculties" (13). According to physicians and scientists, alcohol acted as an artificial stimulant on the body and brain, producing abnormal excitement of the human organism. This unnatural excitement, William Carpenter urged, constituted not a "*uniform exaltation* of the mental powers," but rather, "in some degree a perversion of them" (18). Alcohol weakened considerably, in Carpenter's telling, the drinker's

voluntary control over the current of thought, which is the distinguishing character of the sane mind of Man [...] whilst there is an exaltation of the *automatic* activity of the mind, there is with this a weakening of the *power of self-direction* which is the source of our freedom and responsibility [...] (18-19)

As an unnamed physician summarized the effects of intoxication late in the century: "The region of the brain which is the seat of reasoning and moral faculties is the first to suffer," leaving the "seat of animal propensities" excited and "uncontrolled by reason and conscience" (Stebbins 38). Prolonged intemperance often led to the ultimate loss of control: delirium tremens, the alcoholic derangement of the brain that produced horrific hallucinations, violent delusions, and sometimes, death. Celebrated temperance orator John B. Gough, who lectured widely in the United States and Europe on his experiences as a drunkard, described a fit of delirium tremens as three days of "more agony than the pen can describe, even were it guided by the mind of Dante" (103).²

2. On delirium tremens in American medical and social thought, see Matthew W. Osborn, *Rum Maniacs: Alcoholic Insanity in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: University of

Worse still, medical men and lay reformers alike agreed that artificially stimulating the body and mind often produced an unnatural appetite for alcoholic stimulus, resulting in the habitual need for more strong drink. Intemperance produced an “unquenchable thirst for intoxicating liquor”, one clergyman averred, that led to an infallible perseverance in the vice [...] were the alternative submitted to his choice, he would rather part with his right hand than his bottle” (Prime 10). Providing a theological perspective, prominent temperance activist Justin Edwards explained that liquor induced drinkers to covet more bodily enjoyment than God approves, forming in the process an “*unnecessary, artificial, and very dangerous appetite*, which, by gratification, like the desire for sinning, in the man who sins, tends continually to increase” (Edwards, *Traffic* 2). The imperiousness of alcoholic appetite rendered it singularly dangerous and implacable. Drinkers “inevitably derange their nervous systems, disorder the functions of the stomach, and thus enfeeble their resolution—the very power on which they rely to escape from the pit into which they are venturing” (Jewett 18). Drunkards consider falsehood, theft, family ruin, and the loss of reputation “light matters compared with the want of the favorite draught;” even as pain, punishment, and death shake “their terrific weapons at the very eye, the inward rage for stimulating fluids becomes more violent, and let the issue be what it may, these fluids must be quaffed” (Fullerton 11). In this state, few held out much hope for the inebriate, whose plight most reformers considered irremediable. Temperance advocates argued for prohibitory legislation precisely because “there is no process of resuscitation for the drowning man [...] we demand of the law to dam up the stream, and prevent the overflow of those waters whose course is destruction” (Austin 18).

Reformers warned that alcohol’s effect on the brain ramified beyond the drinker himself. Appeasing the unnatural appetite for alcohol had serious repercussions for the drinker and those around him, the sum of which amounted to perversion of the natural order. First, the unrelenting appetite for strong drink alienated the inebriate from his family, friends, and associates. Intemperance “consumes every virtue, dissolves every social tie, and destroys every noble faculty,” lamented opponents of pauperism in 1820 (*Second Annual Report* 6). Temperance advocates considered alcohol’s impact on the domestic sphere particularly egregious. Intemperance, a reformer noted ruefully, “destroys a relish for the simple and noiseless pleasures of home, and for virtuous, temperate society” (Hitchcock, *Temperance* 29). Liquor, all agreed, “drown[ed] conjugal, parental, filial, and fraternal love” (*On Intemperance* 48). What other vice, South Carolinian Thomas S. Grimké wondered, so effectively dishonored the

Chicago Press, 2014). For a discussion of physicians and temperance, see Scott C. Martin, “‘He is an excellent doctor if called when sober’: Temperance, Physicians, and the American Middle Class, 1800-1860,” *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* 24:1 (2010), 20-36.

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"Husband in the eyes of the Wife, and the Wife in those of the Husband?" (18). Though particularly hard on a drunkard's family, alcohol's derangement of the drinker's brain rendered him incapable of maintaining any normal social relationships. Charles Jewett, a leading temperance figure, compared social ties, whether familial, personal, or business, to the spokes of a wheel, with the individual in question as the hub at the center. Unlike other misfortunes, such as failure in business, which affected only single spokes, intemperance affects the "centre of that circle of interests, the very hub of the wheel, and, by diseasing his body, clouding his intellect, alienating or crushing his social affections, and depraving his moral nature, it loosens, and deranges every spoke in the wheel" (56). Ultimately, liquor, by effects on the drinker's now diseased brain, rots the hub itself, destroying the drinker and everyone around him.

Alcohol and the Market

Alcohol's destructive power extended beyond the individual and his immediate social circle, however, to derange the nation's entire economic system. Temperance advocates, like most Americans, embraced the emerging market, but they assumed that its operation would benefit the whole population, and be ruled by fair dealing and basic morality. The liquor trade undermined this faith. Obviously, intoxicated workers disrupted commerce: "experience has set beyond all controversy," maintained a South Carolinian temperance supporter, "that Intemperance is the mother of irregular habits of business of every description." In the southern states, intoxicating drinks took a special toll, serving to "weaken, if it does not entirely destroy the sense of duty and the spirit of subordination in Servants" as well as the "sentiment of justice, and disposition to be kind, considerate, and forbearing" on the part of masters (Grimké, *Address* 11, 18). Temperance advocates insisted that the traffic in liquor benefited neither the individual proprietor nor the economy as a whole. "Where has a man lived," asked one disdainfully, "who has amassed a fortune by the sale of liquor—has died sober and left a fortune to sober children?" (Chipman 64). Strong drink, its opponents argued, exercised power enough over its hordes of devotees to invert the ordinary laws of economics. They imagined a system in which demand created supply, in every case but that of the liquor traffic. John Marsh, the dean of temperance authors and activists, put the case simply:

[M]en will never cease to drink while the traffic continues. The supply creates the demand. While in things essential the demand creates the supply, it is here all the reverse;—cut off the supply and you cut off the demand, and, with it, drunkenness, poverty, wounds, madness, and every other accompanying evil. (20)

Much of the belabored economic critique of alcohol rested on its purported valuelessness to any productive purpose, for temperance forces considered liquor "not only worthless, but mischievous" (Harvey 19).

The production, sale, and use of intoxicants yielded nothing, “neither directly nor indirectly, but a real waste; not only a consumption, but a destruction of capital [...] after you have consumed your liquor [...] you have destroyed [your capital]; so that the country is a loser by the amount of your capital, which you have thus unproductively consumed” (Agnew 4, 7). Distillers and vendors of spirits, noted temperance activist Charles Jewett charged, produced no useful commodities, only an evil that taxes citizens “more heavily, and eat[s] larger holes into the very roots of their prosperity, than any other evil which curses the community” (42). Liquor manufacturers and sellers, he railed, took “raw materials” and turned out a single “manufactured article,— a drunkard!” (43) This imposition on the community for private gain contravened all the laws of political economy: no one ought to have “privileges incompatible with the common-weal,” a Kentucky temperance orator held, “or to employ his property in a way to injure his fellow-citizens” (Halsey 10). An Ohio clergyman lamented in 1833 how the burgeoning liquor trade set a bad example that perverted the morality of the free market. In the country’s

present depraved state, selfishness controls the affections and the conduct of the generality of mankind. Each individual aims supremely at his own private, separate good, and subordinates the good of all others [...] Provided my own interest is promoted, what need I care whether others are benefitted or injured? (Rodgers 1)

As this passage illustrates, at precisely the time when free market ideology and liberal economics gained ascendancy in U. S. politics and society, temperance advocates argued forcefully against their fundamental tenets. The intoxicating power of alcohol, they imagined, proved capable of slapping the wrist of the market’s invisible hand.³

Intemperance and the Natural Order

Temperance forces attributed enormous power to alcoholic intoxication: it, alone among vices, could seemingly confound the laws of God and nature. Nineteenth-century gender ideology, for example, held that women possessed superior virtue, modesty, and capacity for love when compared to men. Theologians, physicians, scientists, and moralists considered these traits to be innate in women: ordained by God’s creation of woman as a companion to man and deeply rooted in the physiological structure of the female sex. Thus these attributes were both “natural” and divinely-ordained, and seemingly so woven into the fabric of female bodies and minds as to be immutable.

3. On the development of market ideology in 19th-century America, see Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1977), and John L. Larson, *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010).

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Immutable, that is, except by alcohol. Despite woman's inherent virtue, remarked a clergyman, a "fact remains to be told which is enough to freeze the blood—[intemperance] extends its havoc among women and children [...] there cannot be a more disgusting object, than a drunken woman" (Gunn 16). Female delicacy, it seemed, offered no protection from the demon rum: women partaking of "inebriating indulgences," railed another reformer, became "even more debased than their brutalized husbands" (Hartley 139). Commentators expressed special shock and dismay at alcohol's ability to sever the strongest bond imaginable, the love of a mother for her children. Some wished to draw the curtain on a "subject [...] too revolting and horrible" to contemplate, the "intemperate mother," (Mitchell 10) but others confronted it directly, attesting that intemperance "has caused mothers to abandon the children of their own body" (*Proceedings* 13). One witness to this "hideous and mortifying" spectacle "beheld *mothers* staggering with infants in their arms" (*Evils of Drunkenness* 3); another testified to "authenticated instances" of mothers taking bread given by charity to satisfy their children's hunger, "yea, literally stripping from their children the clothes [...] [given] to keep them from the cold, and selling them for intoxicating liquors" (Stow 12). Is there "another influence under heaven," a scandalized observer asked, to abandon a sick child to the "united power of disease, biting cold, and utter loneliness," except the "accursed power of the intoxicating cup [...] no other power than that of alcoholic drinks [is] capable of conquering a *mother's love*?" (Jewett 77).

Not only could alcohol derange natural gender roles, it could also frustrate God's plan for human salvation, inflicting, as one cleric put it, "grievous wounds on the cause of Christ" (M'Congaughy 15). Intoxication caused physical, mental, and social ills, but "in this dreadful series of evils, the most awful is *the ruin of the soul*. A drunkard is, of course, irreligious" (Stow 14). The drunkard, a religious writer explained, is "*for the time being, an Atheist*. He neither knows nor believes a God" (Grimké, *Temperance* 12). Worse still, intemperance made recognition of sin and sincere desire for repentance difficult and unlikely. The "tendency of this vice," lamented one temperance writer, "is to remove men from the very means of salvation [...] It marks the soul as its victim, and its inflictions are eternal. It robs heaven and peoples hell. It places its slave in the attitude of everlasting rebellion against God" (Beman 19, 20).

Intemperance as a Model for Addiction

As the foregoing suggests, nineteenth-century temperance advocates found nothing positive about drinking or intoxication. Their imagining of alcohol as the "demon rum" posited strong drink as *sui generis*, a commodity unlike any other, the effects of which were so uniquely powerful as to nullify the laws of God and nature. This vision resonated with many sectors of American society

during the nineteenth century, and provided strong support for prohibitory legislation at the local, state, and, ultimately, national levels. With the end of national prohibition in 1933, however, American views on alcohol changed, shifting from conceiving habitual intoxication as a moral transgression to defining it as a medical condition. Still, in providing graphic accounts of the horrors of intemperance, the reform imagination of the nineteenth-century temperance movement did shape modern views of alcohol and alcoholism in important ways.

Beginning with Benjamin Rush in the late eighteenth century, some temperance advocates viewed habitual intemperance as a form of disease, albeit with moral implications. Though initiated by a person's decision to drink, intemperance seemed to take on a life of its own, independent of individual attempts at reform. For Rush, drunkenness constituted an "odious disease," emphasizing that despite popular moral opprobrium of drunkards, "by this name it should be called" (5). Rush admitted that medical and humanitarian efforts to cure a "disease induced by an act of vice" would "meet with a cold reception from many people," but insisted that its victims deserved the same compassion as those afflicted by other maladies (29). Like Rush, later reformers struggled to reconcile the moral and medical aspects of drunkenness, pointing out its unique characteristics. "It is not a fever, an asthma, a palsy, a consumption, nor any other of those modes of danger and suffering that are defined and described, and for which a remedy is proposed in our treatises of medicine," noted one writer, "but still a disease" (Mitchell 5). Though dependent on human weakness for its inception, medical writers usually agreed that intemperance possessed "symptoms as distinct, and consecutive, as any other morbid affection" (*Address to Physicians* 17).

Later in the century, physicians and scientists interested in the social and public health dimensions of chronic intoxication to alcohol developed the disease concept further. Denunciation of drunkards as sinners and reprobates might satisfy religionists and moral reformers, but it hardly furthered efforts to solve the problem. Consequently, in 1872, the American Association for the Cure of Inebriates declared intemperance a "disease of the most grave and fearful character," while acknowledging that not all moralists, reformers, or religious folk would agree (3). Medical doctors and scientists, both natural and social, highlighted the similarities between addictions to alcohol and other drugs, most notably opium and its derivatives, coining the term "inebriety" to describe chronic abuse of intoxicating substances. The pioneers of the inebriety movement came down squarely in favor of denominating chronic drunkenness and drug abuse as medical conditions. One described intemperance as a "pathological condition" that is "*molecular*, affecting the molecules and influencing the operations of the mind, thus rendering its manifestations abnormal in many ways" (Bowditch 44). Others argued that the "various forms of inebriety" bespoke a perversion or derangement of a

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"natural desire" in the "human constitution [...] for something to stimulate, that will excite to lively and pleasant sensations" (Burr 2, 4). When wisely managed, physician Willard Parker explained in the 1870s, innate appetites such as hunger and thirst "help to keep the system healthy," but when diseased, they manifested as "*cravings* of the system for alcohol, opium, hashish, etc." (3). The inebriate's condition, Parker elaborated, is abnormal: "What is denominated appetite, therefore, is a state of suffering dependent upon disease, as in colic or pleurisy, and the craving and demand for relief are beyond the power of the will" (4). Here, in embryo, are the major components of the "disease concept" of alcoholism that gained sway during the 1930s and 1940s, in the wake of Prohibition's repeal and the ascendancy of the Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step approach to treating alcoholism. Though the moral and theological aspects of nineteenth-century temperance ideology receded, the reform imagination that produced them contributed other components to modern conceptions of alcohol and drug abuse.⁴

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