

SYMPOSIUM:
BRIAN HARRISON'S *DRINK AND THE VICTORIANS*

Introduction by David W. Gutzke

The year 2001 marked the 30th anniversary of the publication of Brian Harrison's *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815-72*; ten years ago, in 1994, its second edition was published. Written on a magisterial scale, with 405 pages of text, 56 pages of references, and superb topic and subject indexes of 37 pages, his book ranked as a coming of age for the serious academic study of alcohol in Britain. No one had previously investigated archival sources, integrated political and social history or studied such a wide scope of temperance history as meticulously, imaginatively or fruitfully as Harrison. To commemorate this book's important appearance, I have arranged a symposium of several specialists in Victorian drink history, and asked them to comment on what they see as his contribution to the field and assess *Drink's* impact on their perceptions and on the profession as a whole. Their comments appear alphabetically.

David M. Fahey

In 1971 a young British historian, Brian Harrison, published his first book, over five hundred pages on *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872*. Based on a doctoral thesis (Oxford, 1966), it sailed into scholarly acclaim accompanied by a flotilla of shorter publications, mostly articles in major journals. Although in 1994 Harrison published a slightly revised second edition, for all practical purposes he left the field

of drink and temperance in the 1970s. Most recently, he edited the monumental *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published in 2004.

The first edition of *Drink and the Victorians* was published in England by a major commercial press (Faber) and in the United States by a less than famous academic press (Pittsburgh), the second edition in England by a small academic press (Keele). I proudly own all three imprints. Curiously, there has been no paperback edition. A database called WorldCat (which probably under-reports libraries outside North America) identifies fewer than six hundred copies of Harrison's first edition at libraries around the world and only 72 copies of the second edition. The second edition also is available as an electronic text.

To assess Harrison's achievement as a historian of drink and temperance, I divide the inquiry into three parts: how he changed the way historians outside his specialization looked at alcoholic drink and sobriety movements, how specialists define the strengths and limitations of Harrison's work, and how it has affected subsequent research and publication.

Reviewers immediately recognized that Harrison had written a major work. His first book was a magnum opus. *Drink and the Victorians* quickly entered the bibliographies of every textbook on nineteenth-century England. According to the new conventional wisdom, historians had to notice the English temperance movement and the drinking that it critiqued. In other words, it wasn't only the United States that had a serious temperance movement. Probably non-specialists, few of whom actually read *Drink and the Victorians*, picked up at least two of Harrison's arguments: that in Victorian England temperance and alcoholic drink were entangled with all sorts of important things and that temperance had something to do with respectability.

Specialists praised *Drink and the Victorians* and Harrison's other related publications as landmark scholarship. In a review that I published in an obscure American journal (*Cithara*, Nov. 1972), I characterized his book as both pioneering and definitive,

praised his innovative analysis of the individuals who peopled temperance societies, noted that he demonstrated how alcoholic drink was integrated in social and business life, and emphasized Harrison's ironic and persuasive contention that the temperance movement played only a peripheral role in the growth of sobriety. It was seemingly unrelated changes that discouraged the kind of heavy drinking that had characterized the early 1800s. "There was almost as close a kinship between the railroad and the temperance reformers as between horse-drawn travel and the publican" (335). I directed my criticisms at Harrison's brief generalizations about the temperance question after 1872.¹

After the passage of more than thirty years, I remain firm in my admiration for what Harrison did. I wish that in the time left to me I might succeed in writing half as good a book. *Drink and the Victorians* is a work of massive and innovative scholarship. Although it is best described as a study in pressure group politics, it also is an imaginative social history that enriches our understanding of the history of leisure. It is a successfully ambitious book. Almost nobody writing afterwards has attempted to write seriously about both the temperance movement and the drink trade.

It may be churlish to regret that Harrison did not do even more. First, there is the matter of his concluding date. I wish that he had extended his research through the era of the First World War in another fat volume. Second, even for the years that Harrison has chosen for his book, he neglects many parts of the story. I can imagine a very different book written by a feminist, a Marxist, a cultural historian, or somebody like me, who focuses on Anglo-American connections and contrasts. Although Harrison's second edition adds interesting material, notably an autobiographical essay, it does not systematically address what had been written between 1971 and 1994 or even clearly identify what is new in the second edition.

The hardest part of my assignment is to decide how Harrison affected subsequent research and publication. For me, the most

surprising conclusion is that Harrison has had little impact on people writing about countries outside the British Isles. In a little memoir that appeared in the *SHAR* (1997), I mentioned a research institute at the University of Florida where in the mid-1980s a group of historians and sociologists discussed temperance and drink. I was the only British specialist present. The others studied Africa, continental European countries, and the United States. When I polled these scholars, several acknowledged that they had not read *Drink and the Victorians* and the others, who read it after they had begun their own research, said that it exerted little influence on their work. Apparently the main consequence of Harrison for such scholars was to legitimate a study of drink and sobriety for non-American parts of the world.

Obviously, Harrison has affected the study of drink and temperance for the British Isles, but how? By leaving the field and by apparently not directing doctoral research in it at Oxford, this influence has been less than otherwise would have been the case. At least one historian (Lilian Lewis Shiman) has said that the magisterial reputation of *Drink and the Victorians* made it difficult for others to publish. Hadn't Harrison already done temperance? Her book was about England and her dates substantially overlapped those of Harrison, and this may have aggravated her problem. Yet even though Harrison kept clear of Scotland, nobody has published a book on Scotland, where drink and temperance were conspicuous parts of national life. There is a bit of thesis work underway today in Britain, but outsiders (Americans, Australians, Canadians) and British emigrants have written much of what few post-1971 publications on temperance and the politics of drink that there are. In recent years major academic presses have published books on drink and temperance for France, Germany, and Russia. In contrast, they show little interest in books dealing with England and other parts of the British Isles. Although there are frequent publications about the drink trade in the British Isles as businesses and as sites of popular culture, the state of temperance history there is far from robust.

Sadly, Harrison's *Drink and the Victorians* has attracted few historians to the field of English and British temperance history.

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John Greenaway

In contrast to North America, the history of alcohol, temperance and liquor licensing in Britain had attracted little interest before 1970. The material that did exist was largely anecdotal or written by uncritical partisans of ancient controversies. Brian Harrison's book changed all that. The simultaneous depth of his research and the breadth of his intellectual outlook provided us with the authoritative volume that spanned social history, economic history and politics and which related the Drink question to such issues as the standards of living debate, working class culture, the nature of liberalism etc. which were exercising other historians. Notwithstanding its title, the volume is about early or mid-Victorian Britain and in subsequent decades a host of historians, many from North America, have furthered our understanding of the both the economic, social and political aspects of the Drink/temperance question.

I am asked to comment on why drink and temperance history failed to expand in subsequent years and why it failed to gain wider scholarly recognition. I think that that very question is possibly symptomatic of the problem—if problem it be. Unlike Harrison himself, who moved on to study other social movements, such as the women's suffrage movement and later the evolving political system, historians have had a tendency to over-specialization, so that drink/temperance studies itself has become a niche market. There have been too few books like Hamer's study of late Victorian agitational politics which looks at temperance reformers alongside other movements. Again, the problem of the subject is that it can straddle the fields of political,

social, cultural and economic history and History as a subject has tended to specialize perhaps unduly along those lines. Few, moreover, have been able to match Harrison's powers of synthesis across the areas. Another factor is that the temperance area does not easily fit into the dominant outlook and concerns of British social and political historians. For much of the last century British historians tended to be dominated by the ethos and outlook of social democracy in the long shadow of the Webbs, G. D. H. Cole and their successors. The focus of social history tended to be *labor* history and the study of government to be the study of social policy which related to the growth of the state. The last quarter century saw a reaction against this, but the focus then was on such themes as the power of the aristocracy, the importance and autonomy of "high politics" and issues about the decline of Britain in economic terms. Few, moreover, have been interested in pushing the story beyond 1900.

I am convinced that the Drink area does have a lot to offer; but we need to raise our sights to the broader horizons and seek fruitful areas of intellectual cross-fertilization. I myself am humbly attempting something of the sort. Thirty years ago my Ph. D. thesis was on the narrow area of the local option question in Britain, which related the temperance issue to questions of local government reform and local democracy. Harrison's work was, of course, the starting point of my researches. Since then I have worked exclusively in the field of political science working in areas such as the changing nature of Whitehall since 1855 and the theory and practice of policy-making in Britain. A few years ago it occurred to me that a study of the Alcohol question could make a good study of social policy over a long time span. Accordingly I am working on a broad brush study of the question from 1830 to 1960 with a view to showing how the changing politics of Drink could illuminate how the British political system worked and how some abstract theories of the policy process might be tested.² I know that there are dangers in such a wide and interdisciplinary approach. Political scientists get impatient with too much

historical detail, whereas historians get twitchy if a large timescale is adopted. However, I am comforted by the fact that Harrison himself has written such a text in his general, analytical, political history *The Transformation of British Politics, 1860-1995* (1996).³

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Written on a monumental scale, *Drink and the Victorians* ranks as a seminal study. What impresses most in retrospect is that Harrison wrote the book with remarkably few secondary sources to guide him. His was the role of the pioneer in another sense, for the primary sources he consulted were both scattered and neglected. The usefulness of *Drink* partly reflects a decision he took in literally the last stages of the manuscript, when most author's zeal for further work flags. Again he displayed the same meticulous care as had marked the entire project. His indexes are extraordinary, and must have consumed weeks of effort. The General Index covers 37 pages of small type, with numerous subheadings and cross-references. Another smaller Author Index of five pages with three columns in small type further enhances the book's effectiveness.

Drink was also important because of his interpretation. By conceptualizing the topic as characterized by four distinct responses to drunkenness, Harrison adopted a framework for illustrating changes in social class and religion over half a century. His stress on the enduring significance of respectability to temperance reformers contributed significantly to the debate among social historians on the role of respectability in promoting social cohesion.

Harrison's book set a high standard for scholarship, but surprisingly no outpouring of monographs followed. A decade elapsed before A. E. Dingle saw his Australian dissertation on

the United Kingdom Alliance appear. Other dissertations which followed Harrison's focus on temperance were transformed into books in the 1980s: W. R. Lambert's on Welsh temperance; Elizabeth Malcolm's on Irish temperance; and Lilian Shiman's complementary book, *Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England*. Shiman's experience typified the unenthusiastic response of publishers. *Crusade* appeared in 1988, nearly two decades after the dissertation on which it was based was completed. My book concluded the decade, and was the only one examining the coalescing of the diverse drink groups into a pressure group. After this promising heightened interest, sustained early in the 1990s with Kerrigan's study of Father Mathew, the field collapsed.⁴

How can one explain why Harrison's substantial book did not point the way to an emerging new specialty? Part of the problem must be attributed to publishers: British drink research seems not to sell particularly well. I was told by a large firm that a predecessor's book had sold just 377 copies, and this more than anything else apparently damned my manuscript in the editor's eyes. This may help account for the dozen or so unpublished dissertations on late Victorian drink subjects. But the problem is more complex. Temperance as a research topic has much less appeal than in the US simply because nothing very momentous resulted in Britain. The enactment of prohibition and experience with it in the US provided ample justification for research. Ironically, the one direct parallel, the passage of Scotland's local veto legislation in 1913, has been overlooked by researchers. In the end, perhaps Harrison's own comprehensive scope discouraged both scholars and publishers, who questioned the need for more studies merely duplicating his Harrison's findings. Harrison shaped the field indirectly by legitimizing a research approach. Too much temperance research as a result has concentrated narrowly on organizational histories, leading individuals, politics and legislation. Had researchers imported theoretical ideas and concepts from scholarship on other countries, and sought to put temperance and drinking in a wider framework such as women's

suffrage, local government, social mobility, and working-class culture, the field might have attracted more graduate students and eager publishing companies. Perhaps after thirty years British historians interested in drink topics need to think about embracing another agenda for research.

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NOTES

1. For a more detailed contemporary review, see Clyde Binfield, "Temperance and the Cause of God," *History* 57 (1972): 403-10.
2. Since writing these words, Greenaway published his monograph, *Drink and British Politics since 1830: A Study in Policy-Making* (Basingstroke and New York: Palgrave, 2003).
3. Greenaway contributed the entry on Harrison in the ABC-CLIO encyclopedia, *The Modern History of Alcohol and Temperance*, ed. Jack S. Blocker and others (Santa Barbara, 2003) 1:287-88.
4. After a long pause two major books appeared in 2002--John F. Quinn, *Father Mathew's Crusade: Temperance in Nineteenth-Century Ireland and Irish America*, and Paul A. Townend, *Father Mathew, Temperance and Irish Identity*. Gutzke's *Pubs and Progressives: Reinventing the Public House in England, 1896-1960*, is scheduled for publication in late 2005.