

Brewing Trouble: Bloomsbury and Booze

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On Monday 17th 1814, the area surrounding St. Giles was subject to what the *Morning Post* described as ‘one of the most melancholy accidents we ever remember’:

About six o’clock, one of the vats in the extensive premises of Messrs. HENRY MEUX and Co. in Banbury-Street, St. Giles’s burst, and in a moment’s time New-street, George-street, and several others in the vicinity, were deluged with the contents amounting to 3,500 barrels of strong beer. The fluid, in its course, swept every thing before it. Two houses in New-street, adjoining the brew-house were totally demolished. The inhabitants, who were of the poorer class, were all at home. In one of them they were *waking* a child that died on Sunday morning.¹

Though there is the temptation in hindsight to riff on the farcicality of what has been called The Great Beer Flood of London, commentators at the time recognised that this was nothing less than a catastrophe. In the end, the body count was eight. The dead were of Irish descent, as we might have anticipated from the flood’s location in a part of London characterised by its Hibernian immigrant population, and all of them were women and children – the men were still at work, and thus were not yet in the crowded basements they knew as home. Those who were unfortunate enough to be indoors when the vats burst clambered onto what furniture they had in an attempt to escape the rising brown waters. As so often in disasters (natural, man-made, or a mixture of the two – as in this case) poverty exacerbated the consequences of the initial calamity. That marginal detail of *antediluvian* infant mortality reminds us that the accident only supplemented a generally high child death toll, it being for the poor in particular an all too common part of the fabric of everyday life.

As is now the case, disaster makes a fine spectacle for those not intimately acquainted with it: a letter by ‘A FRIEND TO HUMANITY’ to the *Morning Post* bears witness to the author’s self-consciously benevolent attempt to visit the scene of destruction. After dodging collapsible walls and bristling at the presence of so many other gawping spectators, our philanthropist returns home and writes an angry letter about it all, one peculiar example of the voluminous middle class discourse on the ill effects of alcohol upon the poor:

I have always held it as my firm opinion, that the many large and extensive breweries and distilleries in this metropolis (though highly necessary in themselves), are most dangerous establishments, and at the same time great public nuisances, and should not be permitted to stand in the heart of the town, but should be detached from it, as our magazines for gun-powder are, being, in my opinion, equally dangerous with them...²

Scholarly work on the cultural geography of alcohol has attended more to the site of consumption than production, naturally enough, as juicy sources to play with like the one above are relatively thin on the ground. After all, a more frequent cause of anxiety to commentators in the nineteenth century than the freakish possibility of further and more terrible beer deluges was the more pervasive permeation of working class homes with booze, as beverage rather than flood risk. As Brian Harrison has examined, in the Victorian period the concerns of earlier centuries about drinking were modulated by the specific reformist

¹ *The Morning Post* Wed 19 Oct 1814.

² *The Morning Post* Sat 29 Oct 1814.

spirit of the age.³ Drinking became embroiled in contemporary contestations over the way the individual's relation to the social body. Drinking became pathologized by some and politicised by others – meanwhile a moral undercurrent existed alongside all of these formulations, at least as part of the rhetoric. In the texts I'll examine from the latter part of the nineteenth century, working class drinking is a source of anxiety, but also an excuse for the pleasures of sensationalizing and moralizing.

In comparison, our friend's parenthetical recognition of the great necessity of breweries to the metropolis pointedly suggests a very precise limit to his worries about the dangers of beer – i.e. its location in the city centre.⁴ As we know from histories of the nineteenth-century temperance movement's eighteenth-century antecedents, other more far-reaching critiques were in circulation concerning the dangers of all drinking, but not in this case. It was more common for pre-Victorian temperance campaigners to *commend* the consumption of beer in opposition to the abuse of stronger spirits. It is ironic in this context that the poor inhabitants of St. Giles drowned in beer rather than gin, when Hogarth's famous 'Gin Lane' had sixty years earlier used that area to figure the debauchery and infanticide associated with that liquor in direct contrast to the healthiness of 'Beer Street'. From the mid Victorian period on, the working class consumption of all kinds of alcohol became an increasingly contentious issue, and the old distinction of Gin Lane and Beer Street was proclaimed soft and obfuscatory by many prominent figures in the temperance movement that felt a more radical rejection of drinking was required. As the century progressed, the temperance movement became more and more prominent. As Deborah Mutch has explored, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century a distinctively socialist discourse on working class alcohol consumption emerged in addition to Tory and social reformist Liberal narratives, which subjected previous and current apologies for and attacks upon pub culture to critique for their individualisation of the issue.⁵ It is within this context of an enlivened public debate about alcohol and working class drinking that I want to showcase some episodes from a few late nineteenth-century novels that stage anxieties about working class drinking in Bloomsbury.

The cultural geography of alcohol consumption has received some attention, though that of non-drinking is just as interesting, though less explored.⁶ Temperance was especially a feature of parts of the country dominated by non-conformism, such as the North of England and Wales, but within a generally wet London, an overtly serious Bloomsbury had at least some dry pockets. Gower Street was the site of the first National Temperance Hospital when it first opened in 1877 to practise medicine without the use of alcohol, before it moved slightly northwards to the Hampstead Road in 1885. Moreover, by the late nineteenth-century Bloomsbury had become associated with temperance hotels, a fact some early twentieth century writers make use of: Bloomsbury temperance hotels are mentioned in passing by Evelyn Waugh *Vile Bodies* (1930) and the Miss Alans in Forster's *A Room with a View* stay

³ Brian Harrison *Drink and the Victorians* (Faber & Faber, 1971)

⁴ Despite, or perhaps, because of the alarmist way the brewery is compared to a weapons store, there is in these health and safety concerns the unmistakable note of modernity. Modern too is the suggestion that suburbanization might be the solution to the problems of the city. As a number of urban historians and historical geographers have explored, one key trend of the nineteenth-century city was the relocation to the suburban margins of various activities that once took place at its core, a trend whose better known participants included cemeteries, abattoirs and asylums. It would be interesting to trace the historical geography of breweries, as they disappeared from the city centre along with other industries that might be construed as ideologically sensitive.

⁵ Deborah Mutch, 'Intemperate Narratives: Tory Tipplers, Liberal Abstainers and Nineteenth-Century British Socialist Fiction', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36.2, September 2008, 471-487.

⁶ James Kneale, 'The place of drink: temperance and the public', *Social and Cultural Geography* 2(1), 2001, 43-59.

at one such 'clean, airless establishment much patronized by provincial England'.⁷ (Forster himself wrote part of the novel in the years 1902-4, when he lived in the Kingsley Hotel, which opened in 1898.) This somewhat dry feel to the area may have stemmed in part from its association with religious non-conformism; in addition to UCL's non-denominational quality, there was, after all, the Presbyterian theological college in Queen Square until 1899. It might be no coincidence that in H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897) the University College scientist Griffin is trying to make his way back to his lodgings when he is impeded by a Salvation Army crusade, marching around, singing its hymns and waving its flags, around the British Museum and Russell Square.⁸

In 1814, the Great Beer Flood knocked down some of those notorious slums on Bloomsbury's southern edge. By the later part of the nineteenth century most of the rest of old St. Giles had been cleared away, this time not by accident but by design, in the 1840s metropolitan building projects that created New Oxford Street and Shaftsbury Avenue. In spite of those clearances, Bloomsbury as a whole declined socially over the 1800s. Streets and squares that when new had been intended for the wealthy or even aristocratic became gradually dominated by multi-occupancy housing, with its attendant social mix and air of temporariness. As E. V. Lucas said of Bloomsbury in 1906 'its myriad boarding-houses give the lie to the poet's statement that east and west can never meet', a concise gesture to the fact that they catered to a very diverse range of tenants that spanned the city's geographically encoded class divide.⁹ Of the more middle class types, here could be found economical tourists wanting to be within walking distance of all the central sites without having to pay West End prices, students at University College London, young doctors working at the various hospitals nearby, as well as one over-represented species in fiction from the period, writers who haunted the British Museum reading room. These boarding houses, converted from grand Georgian houses built to house a single rich family with servants, inevitably entailed the mingling of classes. The different sized rooms available on the different floors would attract different classes of people on different budgets, with different and sometimes conflicting cultural practices. As places of sometimes uncomfortably close social interaction they were naturally suited to fiction that explored the boundaries of class.

As Sharon Marcus has explored, London boarding houses were complex and richly unstable sites, culturally speaking, within a city that liked to define itself against multi-occupancy housing.¹⁰ While the public arena of the city itself demanded the continual maintenance of polite behaviour, in a residential context things could slip. Landladies had a difficult job in 'framing' the space over which they were in charge, having to promote a sense of 'respectability' for the more middle class tenants, while needing to practice tolerance enough to retain all her paying guests. The stasis landladies were trying to preserve was always rubbing up against the social mobility of her guests, a precariousness that proved a fruitful *donnée* for fiction, which could play on the physical proximity of characters with varying moral compasses. As Dickens's short story 'The Boarding House' (1830/1) suggests, landladies were pleased to tolerate a mild sexual frisson between guests, if it meant they were

⁷ E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (Penguin, 2006) p178.

⁸ Wells himself knew Bloomsbury well, having taught at the University Tutorial College there in the latter part of the nineteenth century. His *Ann Veronica* (1909) explores the area's association with feminism.

⁹ E. V. Lucas, *A Wanderer in London* (Methuen, 1906) p221.

¹⁰ Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (University of California Press, 1999).

more likely to remain under the same roof and keep on paying the bills, but there was always the danger that if things got too frisky, wedding bells would signal the need for an advertisement to be put in the paper for two rooms to let. Anthony Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1867) seems to pick up Dickens's theme of the sexual and social precariousness of the Bloomsbury boarding house, Burton Crescent being the location of Mrs. Roper's establishment, where the junior civil servant Johnny Eames lives and tries to avoid becoming too entangled with Miss Mealyer, the landlady's daughter. Though reviewers from the time were inclined to find this section of the novel rather vulgar, more recent critics such as Julia McMaster have claimed its satire as indispensable, forming as it does a structural counterpoint to the central tale of Lily Dale misjudged rejection of Eames and love for the undeserving civil-servant high-flier Crosbie.¹¹ Eames's final realisation that he must extricate himself from Bloomsbury, after all, seems to be the chief condition for his progression from 'hobblehoydehood' to manhood. In one scene, the house's unsuitability is comically confirmed through the drunken antics of one of the other residents, Mr. Lupex, who returns home inebriated one evening and then aggressively challenges Eames's colleague Craddell over his apparent flirtation with his wife. We glean from the way the Lupexes talk to each other, let alone behave, that they are not Eames' social equals - the husband calls his wife 'ducky'¹². But perhaps the fact that the married couple are in lodgings at all represents the larger worry, casting doubts as it does upon the respectability of the house itself for its inclusion of such a pair. While it is just about respectable for middle class singletons to live in Bloomsbury lodgings, there is something rather desperate about married couples attempting to do the same. That Lupex is a bad drunk only confirms that he and his wife are not up to the cut socially, a fact Mrs. Roper becomes increasingly (painfully) cognisant of towards the end of the novel, as she tries desperately to retain the eminently respectable Eames by promising that the Lupexes are on their way out.

In George Gissing's slum novel *The Nether World* (1889) the vulgar Snowdons are depicted as having little concern for respectability when they choose Burton Crescent for lodgings, and their placement there suggested that the street has declined somewhat further since Eames's eventual departure at the end of Trollope's novel. Whether or not Gissing intended to make a geographical nod to Trollope's earlier anatomisation of boarding house life in that text, it was his *first* novel that most appears to elaborate on Trollope's subplot of booze and class clash in the Bloomsbury boarding house. His *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) seems to rework that fictional site with a dash of Zola-esque naturalism, but its treatment of the relationship of alcohol to class identity is fraught with anxiety, in comparison with the essentially comic function of the same theme in Trollope. As the almost pedantically close geographical parallels between Gissing's factual experience of Bloomsbury and the area's depiction in the novel invite, much of the novel's material has been traced back to its author's own experiences of trying to cope with his wife's alcoholism. Its extremely phobic representation of working class drinking, however, aligns *Workers* with some of the arguments being made by social reformers about the impediment drinking represented to proletarian advancement, so it constitutes something of a political intervention as much as a piece of life-writing. When the protagonist Arthur Golding takes up his lodgings in Mrs. Pettindund's boarding house in Gower Place, he also joins his friend Mark Challenger's teetotaler working men's cooperative society. Golding's attitude of 'unutterable disgust' to the boarding house and its other inhabitants appears to be related to his new vow of abstinence, an act whose connection to Golding's broad social and aesthetic aspirations is underlined throughout the text. When

¹¹ Juliet McMaster, "'The Unfortunate Moth': Unifying Theme in *The Small House at Allington*", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* Vol. 26, No. 2, Sep., 1971, pp. 127-144.

¹² Anthony Trollope, *The Small House at Allington* (David Campbell Publishers, 1997) p124.

Golding falls off the wagon near to the end of the novel and embarks on a self-destructive binge, his failure to abstain seems to confirm the end of his social viability; drowning his sorrows prefigures his eventual suicide at Niagara Falls.

Christmas at the Pettindunds' heralds working class drinking excess, though this is by no means unequalled by the level of disgust summoned by the narrator in its depiction:

The uninitiated reader must be informed that the "wetting" of any garment means drinking the health of its wearer. Before many minutes Moggie returned with the prescribed compound in a huge tin can, into which each individual dipped his or her glass till it was all finished. But by this time numerous other visitors had arrived. Prominent among these was young Mr. Spinks, a grocer's counterman, who had an eye upon another Miss Pettindund. He was always the funny man of the party. As he entered the room he struck an attitude and exclaimed in a stagey voice –
 "Bring forth the lush!"
 "Ain't got none!" screamed *his* Miss Pettindund. "Just finished!"
 "So! Then, Moggie, run and get me a 'alfporth o' four 'alf, and blast the hexpense!"¹³

The track between the public house and the boarding house appears to be wide and well-trodden. In response to such largesse Arthur articulates the typical teetotaler's mantra: "Do not such blackguards as these give good cause to the upper classes to speak of us working men with contempt? I warrant they waste as much money to-day in guzzling and swilling as would give twenty or thirty poor starving wretches a good dinner for a week to come." (331) But Arthur's explicit class identification with the subjects of his criticism belies the social distancing of his speech's rhetoric. As the linguistic contrast between the Pettindunds' contrived cockneyisms and Golding's own preachy grammatical correctness confirms, condemnation of working-class drinking all too easily bleeds into middle-class squeamishness about working-class culture *per se*. At another point, the narrator directly echoes Golding's moralising view, by lambasting the tendency of the working class to waste their money on booze: 'They could not be called poor, since the weekly earnings of the family amounted to no small sum, the whole of which they regularly squandered in surfeit and vice' (277). Though Golding appears to be a working class figure, and his arguments for teetotalism and against drinking do mirror some of those appearing in the working class socialist discourse against alcohol consumption, his proximity in voice and tone to the narrator suggests he is really a middle class man in masquerade.

With the emphasis on *man*. After Golding leaves the Pettindunds and moves to other lodgings nearby in Bloomsbury, his anti-alcoholic temperament localises itself in the specific project of his wife's abstinence. A textbook candidate for the nineteenth-century novel's famed participation in disciplinary culture, Golding polices his wife Carrie's behaviour obsessively, pacing around outside her flat and questioning her upon her movements, forbidding her to go to music halls, and generally expecting her to live a puritanical existence like him. The Bloomsbury boarding house and the wider booze culture it metonymises is against him, however, and time and time again Arthur discovers evidence of Carrie's secretive drinking. When, for instance, Arthur walks down Huntley Street one day, he is stopped by Mrs. Pole, the 'landlady of the house in which he had established Carrie previous to their marriage' (387) who notifies him that his wife still owes her five shillings in lieu of drink she has provided on a number of occasions:

¹³ George Gissing, *Workers in the Dawn* (Victorian Secrets, 2010) p326.

“There was ‘alf a quatern o’ brandy that day as you come an’ told me you was too lazy to fetch it yourself; there was another ‘alf quarter that day as you got wet and come into this very kitchen to dry your boots before the fire; then there was a ‘hole quarter that night as you went with my Ann to the Hoxford - ” (390)

This novel’s gestures towards this insidious kind of drinking at home are perhaps its most original contribution to the critique of alcohol consumption, showing as it does just how porous could be the borders between normative drinking and abuse. The boarding house, Gissing suggests, encourages such moral slippage, by blurring the boundaries between the commercial and the domestic. If the discreteness of boarding house alcoholism (in both spellings of the word ‘discrete’/‘discreet’) marks Gissing’s most original fictional intervention in the anti-drinking debate, a scene of public disgrace on Bloomsbury’s streets is perhaps more immediately memorable nonetheless for making manifest the depth of the horror with which Golding and his creator viewed the figure of the working class female drinker. The relatively containable addiction of drinking indoors could all too easily spill over into lurid street life:

‘As he turned into Huntley Street he had to pass a public-house, about the door of which was collected a little crowd. From the midst came the shrill voices of two women, high in dispute. Drawn on by curiosity, he caught a glimpse of the wranglers, and – horror! he saw that Carrie was one of them, the other being her old landlady, Mrs. Pole. Carrie was hatless, her hair streaming in wildest disorder, her dress torn in places, her face swollen and tear-stained...She seemed incapable of walking, and only leaned against him, gasping out his name with hysterical repetition...He could not for a moment doubt what had led to the hideous scene he had just been in time to interrupt. Carrie was quite unable to stand, and her breath filled the room with the smell of spirits...His wife a drunkard, engaging in a low brawl before a public-house – surely this was a degradation of which he could not have dreamt. What would this be the prelude to?’ (397)

Carrie is rendered entirely other in this fall from grace, and in her hatless animal state she becomes a symbol of her husband’s degradation and a prefiguration of *his* future demise.

The feminist and socialist New Woman writer Isabella Ford’s *On the Threshold* (1895) made use of a similar scene of Bloomsbury pub violence, but portrayed the effects of alcoholic culture upon women with more compassion and less misogyny. Two leftwing bohemian middle class girls set themselves up in a Bloomsbury boarding house and there befriend Beatrice, a servant, who has a knack for getting herself into scrapes with her employers. After a row with the landlady, Beatrice runs off into the night, causing the girls to embark on a rescue mission. Here, having located her, they try to drag Beatrice home:

The public-houses were closing, and just before we reached our corner, out of the open door of a large and particularly brightly lighted one across the road, was issuing a stream of fighting, yelling human beings.

Holding Beatrice tightly between us, we fled along the pavement. But Beatrice hung back and tried to stop us.

“Ee! it looks beautiful in there, so bright and warm!”¹⁴

¹⁴ Isabella Ford, *On the Threshold* (Edward Arnold, 1895) p49.

Beatrice's admiration for the artificial beauty of an open pub proves misplaced later on in the novel:

Apparently it was a fight that was attracting everybody's attention. The whole street was rapidly becoming packed with a pushing, struggling crowd of happy, excited human beings, for from the loudness of the shouts and scuffling noise on the pavement outside the public-house, there seemed to be something happening on a larger and handsomer scale of interest than usual....In a few minutes I was across, and on the pavement by the public-house. They were lifting a woman on to a stretcher and covering her over with a shawl; but I was just in time to see that it was Beatrice. Her face was crushed and discoloured, and as they lifted her up, her arms swung heavily and limply against the side of the stretcher, till one of the men lifted them gently and laid them under the shawl. (156-8)

Though Beatrice is beaten to a pulp in a tavern brawl, at no point does the narrator impugn her or imply that she deserves her fate. Though anxious about working class drinking, as the horrific violence of the scene above exhibits, Ford's novel refrains from preaching about proletarian alcoholic culture; its emphasis on the happiness of the 'human beings' (not animals) as they indulge shows signs of awareness of the critiques raised by contemporary socialists about the way more moralistic discussions about working class drinking threatened to individualise what were really social problems. Beatrice isn't represented here as drinking herself, and we never distinguish her attacker from the crowd into which she enters, a sign that might be interpreted as Ford's reticence about finding too straightforward explanations for or solutions to the obviously real damage done. In the context of the novel's socialism, its depiction of the dangers of drinking, though problematic for its failure to render the working class with entirely distinguishable agency, deserve recognition for avoiding moralising an issue rooted in social deprivation.

A novel that appeared the year before by an extremely popular socially conservative woman author, Margaret Oliphant's *A House in Bloomsbury* (1894) makes an almost polar opposite case and pathologizes working class drinking, along with a healthy dose of moral judgement. Overtly presenting the Bloomsbury boarding house as a societal microcosm, Oliphant exploits its potential for inter-class commentary; the first floor is the 'aristocracy' of the house (housing a relatively wealthy Scottish lady who has a live-in servant), the second is respectably middle class (with a man who works at the British Museum), and the top floor is cockney working class. In this novel, the representation of alcohol use is differentiated on class lines. In a scene near the beginning, a reluctant patient, Alfred Hesketh, a poor lodger who lives on the top floor, is brought by his concerned wife to see Dr. Roland, who runs his medical practice from the ground floor. On hearing of Hesketh's symptoms of general lethargy and lack of appetite, Dr. Roland immediately suspects him of drinking too much, a diagnosis the patient's shifty reaction confirms. Roland infantilises his patient by trying to force him to take an opiate as a sleeping aid against his will, and sinisterly warns him that he's headed for the workhouse or worse. The threat of prison is later shown to be proleptic when the plot reveals Hesketh's criminal tendencies, he being caught red-handed trying to steal things from another resident's room. After seeing his patient, Roland turns to his drink cabinet,

compound[s] a drink for himself of a different quality from that which he had given to his patient, and select[s] out of his bookcase a yellow novel. But after a while he

pitched the book from him, and pushed away the glass, and resumed his meditations. What was grog, and what was Gaboriau, in comparison with a problem like this?¹⁵

The doctor's casual use of an alcoholic restorative after scaring the living daylights out of his patient about drinking does not seem to have struck the narrator as a form of hypocrisy. What is still more telling is the medical man's enjoyment of working class alcoholism as an intellectual problem. If yellow novels (from Mudie's, on New Oxford Street, of course) fail to delight, why not put one's brain to thinking upon a juicy social issue, whose ramifications included violence, sex and everything else in between? Better still one could combine the two pleasures, and read a middle class novel about working class drinking.

¹⁵ Margaret Oliphant, *A House in Bloomsbury* (Hutchinson and Co, 1894) p61.