

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

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

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 flu54

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

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:

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

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.