

Public Drinking in the Nineteenth Century.
Saturday 22 February 2014. Clifton Hill House, University of Bristol.

Report by Craig Stafford, University of Liverpool

The Public Drinking in the Nineteenth Century Conference, held at the University of Bristol, brought together researchers from varying disciplines. Historians, geographers and English scholars all delivered diverse papers, linked by the common theme of drink. Each panel represented a different focus on the subject of public drinking and provided a coherent and entertaining look at the subject.

The first panel immediately reflected these diverse strands. Paul Jennings presented a study of the Gin Palace - interestingly by not reflecting too much on the impact of Hogarth's famous 'Gin Lane' – from the late eighteenth century to Edwardian times. His talk concentrated on the urban phenomenon of gin palaces, their changing nature and attitudes towards them. He concluded that gin palaces came to represent how pubs should look and that there are still many examples of their design in public houses today. Steve Earnshaw then combined historical research with literary examples by arguing that the voice of the habitual drunkard, missing from official papers such as Select Committees, could be found in the fictional works of Dickens, Eliot and Zola. This overlap between literature and history was a recurring theme of the day.

The second panel was for me the most valuable part of the day, representing as it did material relevant to my own PhD research. This was especially true of Guy Woolnough's paper, looking at the discretionary policing of a small rural town in Westmorland. His study of the attitudes of the police to the drunkards of Kirkby Stephen provided a counterpoint to my own study of urban areas in Lancashire and the question and answer session gave me some food for thought. David Beckingham's paper was also relevant to my studies, by looking at the drink legislation of the 1870s and its impact on local municipal control. Such factors are an important part of my own work. Sandwiched between these two speakers was Jennifer Diann Jones, who gave a thoughtful and considered paper on the depiction of gin in the life of a fictional preacher in the work of George Eliot.

Session three provided another diverse look at the topic of drink in Annemarie McAllister's work on temperance. This often under-researched subject provided the conference with an alternative look at the world of alcohol by looking at one that eschewed the 'demon drink' and became a hugely popular movement with six million members by the end of the nineteenth century. The literary side of the day was again well-represented in this panel, by Francesca Mackenny's study of attitudes towards working-class poets and drink, and Jonathan Buckmaster's study of Dickens and the depiction in his work of the routines of excessive drinking displayed in nineteenth century pantomime.

The fourth session provided a look at drink through the eyes of the modernist painters, particularly Manet, and his portrayal of beer and beer drinkers. Ed Lilley's paper was punctuated by images which brought to life his arguments, for example Manet's portrayal of women public drinkers not as prostitutes but as respectable members of the bourgeoisie. It was then back to the written word as Mary Lester, in her socio-political study of a drunken tram ride in London and Pam Lock's study of alcoholism in two of the Brontë's novels gave further depth to the importance of alcohol in fiction. The latter also showed how these works were linked to contemporary debates on the body of the alcoholic. The authors in both these studies had first-hand experience of the damaging effects of drink, either through riding a packed London tram on a Friday evening, or the more personal experience of the Brontë sisters concerning their brother Branwell and his struggle with alcohol.

The final session took us back to a more strictly historical study of drink, with geographer James Kneale's look at the complicated, diverse and controversial life of Joseph Granville. Granville, a doctor, became a

proponent of 'rational drinking' – his reaction to the temperance movement - and a man who used the press to push his arguments in public. Kneale's argument was that the view of the public to drinking at the time could have been more complicated than simply being a battle between temperance groups and the drink interest. Finally, Dan Malleck's study of pre and post-prohibition Ontario provided an international flavour to the day and explained how prohibition had little effect on the overall development of the region's public drinking spaces over time.

Overall the day was hugely enjoyable and provided delegates with the chance to hear research from a variety of spectrums. Personally, it was a great opportunity for me to meet researchers in my field and establish new relationships, as well as to swap and gain new ideas for my own work. As someone who has been looking for examples of fictional drunkards to incorporate into my research it has helped direct me to relevant works. A diverse day linked by a common theme which worked extremely well.

Report by Louise Wingrove, University of Bristol

Despite this conference being a nine-hour binge discussing public drinking, there were no ill effects, just a heady and interesting cocktail of information and collaboration from a wealth of departments and universities.

The beautiful setting of Clifton Hill House really added to the proceedings, providing an inspiring setting and talking point throughout the day. The Centre provided seamless transitions between refreshment breaks and kept us well fed and watered.

Coming from the Theatre department and researching female comedienues in Victorian Music Halls, I was aware that I would have a lot to learn from the experts present. I was at once excited about what would benefit my studies and nervous about the potential gaps in my knowledge thus far which could render me mute and out of my depth. I needn't have worried, the friendly atmosphere and clear but not patronizing papers delivered through the day both aided my understanding of the topic and left me longing to probe these fascinating topics further. Of particular interest to me was Annemarie McAllister's paper discussing Nineteenth century displays of temperance, an area quite far removed from the bawdy halls that I usually analyse but integrally entwined. Far from the expectations many would have about the very serious and dower temperance movement, Annemarie McAllister presented an engaging paper showing how active and vibrantly performative the movement could be. The support and options that the movement offered to the community showed the caring, public service providing side of a movement largely thought of as nagging.

Of course of major interest to me was Paul Jennings' paper on The Gin Palace, an establishment that was close to the heart of many music hall patrons, performers and songs. Charting their development socially, economically, politically and legally as well as architecturally all combined to help explain their popularity as well as the fears surrounding them. I was also introduced to the changes in drinking that were occurring in the 1870's that I was not previously aware of, but that now help to explain many comments made and songs sung by my key case studies through that decade.

Guy Woolnough's unique paper discussing the policing of drunkenness in Cumbria offered a fascinating insight into the legal repercussions of drinking as well as the reasoning behind prosecuting in different areas of the country. From an archival point of view, his showing of evidence gleaned from arrest books and police documents has given me a fresh perspective of where to look for more information about my

case studies, particularly Bessie Bellwood who constantly found herself drunk and on the wrong side of the law!

Steve Earnshaw, Jennifer Diann Jones, Francesca Mackenney, Mary Lester and Pam Lock all produced fascinating papers concerning the literary representation and exploration of alcohol consumption. Their papers all created a huge reading list for me to investigate in order to fully understand and appreciate the social backdrop for the period I am researching. Where better to look to for historical atmosphere than the literary experts of the time.

Ed Lilley, David Beckingham and Dan Malleck helped me to look out from my microcosmic study of society in London to fully appreciate the issues of drinking – both social and legal – globally. The London music halls were a hotbed of cross-cultural exchange and so hearing more about other countries drinking habits and control offered another interesting viewpoint.

Finally James Kneale's paper covering the medical aspects of Nineteenth century drinking – particularly relating to Dr Graville - and Jonathan Buckmaster's discussion of extreme drinking in performance – relating to Grimaldi – offered exciting case studies about public figures associated with drinking. Exploring the newly appreciated and printed medical dangers and healing abilities attributed to drink gave yet another lens to view Victorian society through, and the performance of bodies engaged in extreme eating and drinking highly resonated with my topic, looking at the performances and clown-like caricature used on the music hall stage.

This conference, brilliantly organized and prepared by Pam Lock, was a varied, absorbing and, most of all, entertaining and its interdisciplinary nature helped bring this unusual topic to life.