Guest Editor’s Introduction

Public Drinking in the Nineteenth Century

Pam Lock

This special issue of The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs comprises four articles based on papers from a conference on “Public Drinking in the Nineteenth Century” held at the University of Bristol in February 2014. It was convened by Pam Lock and Francesca MacKenney as part of a series of events to mark the launch of the University’s new Centre for Romantic and Victorian Studies.¹

These articles have been selected as representative of the broad themes of the conference. We were fortunate to have such a great selection of speakers and topics across the day. One attendee wrote afterwards that “every single paper was a treat,” so we really were spoilt for choice when putting this special issue together. The full programme for the day is included in the Appendix.

The thirteen speakers represented an excellent balance between depth of knowledge from established speakers such as Paul Jennings and Dan Malleck, and fresh investigations from those newer to the alcohol studies circuit such as Mary Lester and Ed Lilley. “Interdisciplinarity” is the watch-word of alcohol studies, and it is one of the reasons I enjoy being a part of this vibrant field of study. The conference was proudly exemplary of that ideal including delegates and speakers from Cultural Studies, English Literature, History of Art, History, and Geography. The high proportion of delegates from research areas connected with nineteenth-century alcohol studies made the question and answer sessions particularly stimulating and intense. An additional treat was James Nicholls’s eloquent summing up at the end of the day.

The term “public” has had a long-standing and complicated relationship with our understanding of the drinking of alcohol. Drinking in public can be viewed in terms of conviviality, pleasure and companionship, or of individual immorality and lack of control. However, “public” also car-

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ries notions of the community as a whole, and in this way public drinking can communicate political and moral fears around public order and disorder. Conference papers approached the concept of “public” with verve and imagination thoroughly exploring its multiple definitions. “Public” is central to the lexicon of drinking; it was the abbreviation for Public House until this was shortened to “pub,” as discussed by Paul Jennings in terms of another drinking establishment, “The Gin Palace.” “Public” implies visibility; from a lack of concealment, as in Steven Earnshaw’s paper on “Private Sots in Public Places,” to a performance or spectacle, as in Jonathan Buckmaster’s “Extreme Drinking as Performance in the Dickens Pantomime” and Annemarie McAllister’s “The Alternative World of the Proud Non-Drinker.” Class-based concepts of moral inclusiveness and exclusiveness were explored in Francesca MacKenney’s “Drink and the Defamation of the Working-Class Poet”; Jennifer Diann Jones’s “Reading Mr Gilfil’s Gin-and-Water”; and Mary Lester’s “Drink and Disorder in Arthur Morrison’s ‘To Bow Bridge.’” Public discourses around drinking and drunkenness played a key part in many of the papers, particularly James Kneale’s “Dr. Granville’s Thunderbolt” and Pam Lock’s “Discourses of Alcoholism in the Brontë’s novels.” “Public” also carries connotations of “the people” or the community. The moral, social, and economic politics of locations of authorisation and approval in terms of the “public” are particularly visible in terms of alcohol as demonstrated in papers on control and excess, such as Dan Malleck’s “The Half Life of the Victorian Saloon? Change, continuity, and public drinking across prohibition in Ontario, 1880s-1930s”; “Public Drinking and Public Control” by David Beckingham; and “Policing Drunkenness in Victorian Cumbria” by Guy Woolnough.

For further information on the conference, see the report on the Centre for Romantic Studies webpages (http://www.bristol.ac.uk/crvs/events/publicdrinking/reflections.html), the joint report written for the journal, Harts & Minds, by two students who received bursaries to attend the event (http://media.wix.com/ugd/4b5f1a_637e0c28ce14474984b88e4a6c37bfb3.pdf), and the short blog post by delegate and journalist Phil Mellows. (http://www.cpltraining.co.uk/philmellows/post/Drinking-sex-and-geometry.aspx).

This special issue addresses four key areas central to the conference: drink in public discourse, the nuances of public and individual drinking, public spectacle (in this case of temperance), and social hierarchies and public drunkenness. The articles span the nineteenth century, from early medical and temperance approaches to habitual drunkenness in the 1820s and 1830s to the graphic and controversial arguments of the 1890s. They embody the multi-disciplinary ethos of the conference, and alcohol studies as a whole, usefully drawing on current debates and testing received ideas in alcohol studies regarding what is understood by the many guises
of “public drinking.”

James Kneale’s “Dr Granville’s Thunderbolt: Drink and the public in the life of one nineteenth-century doctor” is an account of the eccentric Dr. James Mortimer Granville, whose pro-drinking stance that “drinking was necessary for health” was forcefully articulated in his articles and letters in British newspapers in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Kneale maps the long-running public discourse that stemmed from the doctor’s first letter, restoring Granville to the history of medical discourse.

The four case studies in Steven Earnshaw’s “Habitual Drunkards and Metaphysics” bring together literary, artistic and historical accounts of the figure of the alcoholic. He examines conceptions of habitual drunkenness in several key examples from nineteenth-century literature, exploring the notion of alcoholism as an individual search for meaning in the alienating capitalism of industrial and urban Europe. In Earnshaw’s reading, drunkenness becomes a mode of behaviour designed to define the self, not simply to destroy it.

In “The Alternative World of the Proud Non-Drinker,” Annemarie McAllister adds a valuable balance to this study of public drinking, with her wide-ranging account of the public displays of non-drinking by temperance movements. This important essay combines McAllister’s comprehensive knowledge and understanding of teetotalism and characteristic exuberance to give an engaging insight into the usually unacknowledged fun side of British temperance.

Finally, Mary Lester’s “‘A man may drink many pots therein’: Drink and disorder in Arthur Morrison’s ‘To Bow Bridge’” provides a carefully contextualised account of a text which has undeservedly received little critical attention to date. Lester’s interpretation of Arthur Morrison’s sketch of drinkers travelling by trolley bus to take advantage of London boroughs’ differing local licensing laws reveals a distinctive literary response to the social effects of policy decisions designed to reduce harmful drinking.

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ENDNOTES

1. Our thanks go to the University of Bristol English Department, the Graduate School for Arts and Humanities, and the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) for their generous sponsorship of the conference, and to Dan Malleck for his inspiration and support in the creation of both the conference and this consequent special edition. Finally, the editors would particularly like to thank the reviewers for their valuable feedback on the four articles.
Appendix

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

Session 1 - Public Places and Spaces
Chair: James Nicholls (Alcohol Research UK)
• “The Gin Palace.” Paul Jennings (University of Bradford)
• “Private Sots in Public Places.” Steve Earnshaw (Sheffield Hallam)

Session 2 - Public Control
Chair: Paul Jennings (University of Bradford)
• “Policing Drunkenness in Victorian Cumbria.” Guy Woolnough (Keele University)
• “What Shall We Do with a Drunken Preacher? Reading Mr Gilfil’s Gin-and-Water.” Jennifer Diann Jones (University of Portsmouth)
• “Public Drinking and Public Control.” David Beckingham (University of Cambridge)

Session 3 - Public Display
Chair: David Beckingham (University of Cambridge)
• “The Alternative World of the Proud Non-Drinker: Nineteenth Century Public Displays of Temperance.” Annemarie McAllister (UCLan)
• “Radical Slurs: Drink and the Defamation of the Working-Class Poet.” Francesca Mackenney (University of Bristol)
• “‘The coachman with the hoarse voice... took an imperial pint of vinegar with his oysters, without betraying the least emotion’: Extreme Drinking as Performance in the Dickens Pantomime.” Jonathan Buckmaster (Royal Holloway)

Session 4 - Public Progress
Chair: James Kneale (UCL)
• “From Beer to Modernity.” Ed Lilley (University of Bristol)
• “A man may drink many pots therein’: Drink and Disorder in Arthur Morrison’s ‘To Bow Bridge’ (1893).” Mary Lester (Unaffiliated)
• “Death and the Alcoholic: Public Discourses of Alcoholism in the Brontës’ Novels.” Pam Lock (University of Bristol)

Session 5 - Public Drinking
Chair: Steve Earnshaw (Sheffield Hallam)
• “Dr Granville’s Thunderbolt: Drink and the public sphere in the life of one nineteenth-century doctor.” James Kneale (UCL)
• “The half-life of the Victorian saloon? Change, continuity, and public drinking across prohibition in Ontario, 1880s-1930s.” Dan Malleck (Brock University)

Closing words
James Nicholls (Alcohol Research UK)