Classics of the Alcohol Literature

The Evils of Drunkenness as Sketched by George Cruikshank

With Reproductions of His Etchings

The Bottle and The Drunkard's Children

DRUNKENNESS was rife in England during the first half of the nineteenth century. The seriousness of the problem is well attested in official and belletristic literature of the period. While most of the official and even the propagandistic publications suggest that those chiefly affected were the lower or working classes, there is no lack of evidence that heavy drinking was equally common, if not equally obtrusive, within the upper classes.

These conditions prompted the rise of many reform movements* and inspired a considerable volume of temperance literature, most of it directed specifically toward the reformation of drunkards. A goodly portion of this literature, comprising many important social documents, is of historical interest. It was in the allied field of art, however, rather than in literature, that the temperance cause in early Victorian England gained one of its most useful converts—the renowned artist George Cruikshank (1792–1878).

Cruikshank, a member of a family of artists, received no formal education in art. From his youth, however, he displayed notable talent as a satirical illustrator of life and literature, and he came to be regarded as one of England’s true geniuses. Prolific throughout 75 years of creative activity, Cruikshank produced some 8,000 pictures and saw them sold in countless reproductions. There are, thus, few “scarce” Cruikshankiana. But such is the appreciation that has survived him that his etchings still bring fancy prices. Old editions of famous works containing his illustrations are nowadays usually listed in trade catalogues not under the names of the authors but under “Cruikshank.” “No black and white artist,” writes one of his critics,† “has ever had the power of expressing so much in so little. . . .” Indeed, Cruikshank

† Cohn, Albert M. A Bibliographical Catalogue of the Printed Works Illustrated by George Cruikshank. London; Longmans, Green & Co., 1914.
was accorded the reverence due to an "old master" during the last years of his own lifetime.

Recognized early as a worthy successor to the great Hogarth in the field of humorous art and caricature, Cruikshank was sought as an illustrator by authors and publishers. Among his better-known works are the illustrations of the novels of his contemporaries Ainsworth, Dickens and Thackeray, and of such classics as Don Quixote, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Peter Schlemihl, and the Knickerbocker History of New York. He is no less famous for many original works, as the Illustrations of Phrenology and the Illustrations of Time.

So popular a caricaturist as George Cruikshank could hardly have remained aloof from the political rows of his time. He indulged in these with strong pictorial pamphleteering. As a political caricaturist he spared no one's feelings, did not hesitate to poke raucous fun at the inhabitants of Buckingham Palace. "But the fact is," Bates* declares, "George was no politician and would make a design with rigid impartiality for anyone that paid him." Thus, during the same period, he illustrated for the "ultra-radical" Hone (The Radical Ladder) and for the Loyal Association (The Loyalist, or Anti-Radical).

Bates' evaluation of Cruikshank's talent is interesting for the light it sheds on the artist's special interest in the theme of drunkenness:

In the depiction of low, vicious, and vulgar life,—in the ludicrous, the quaint, the weird, the pathetic, and the terrible,—he is unsurpassed. . . . As a great moral teacher and satirist; as a castigator of our great national sin, and an illustrator by pen and pencil of its direful effects; he is entitled to the admiration and gratitude of our own and future times.

These are the words of a critic who, like many of Cruikshank's friends, regarded the artist's attitude toward alcoholic beverages as "intemperate" and "fanatical."

Cruikshank's aptitude for the depiction of the "low, vicious and vulgar" was certainly based in part on the intimacy of association and first-hand study. The artist's self-portrait shows him seated on a liquor barrel sketching scenes from life. It seems natural, even inevitable, that he should have taken the destructive drinking habits of his countrymen as a major theme. In many works he satirized the bibulous excesses of the period. But in the year 1847, apparently determined to go beyond the mere illustration of his observations, he published an original work

that was designed to influence the intemperate customs of his contemporaries by graphically dramatizing their evil effects. This was his famous series of eight plates under the title *The Bottle* (reproduced herewith*).

Stephens,† who called *The Bottle* "a fierce satire, but nevertheless, and despite its inevitable coarseness and vulgarity, full of pitiful elements and sardonic wit," says that Cruikshank "often declared *The Bottle*, with its inferior sequel, *The Drunkard’s Children*, to be his *chefs d’oeuvre*." Many have agreed with the artist’s own estimate, although most present-day critics prefer various of his other works. There is no question, however, that *The Bottle* was an immediate and popular success. The presses could not supply sets as fast as they were demanded. No literary temperance sermon or lecture could have gained a comparable circulation. Apparently it fulfilled the purpose for which Cruikshank designed it. Bates‡ says:

Right or wrong in the teaching, a vast influence for ultimate good must have been exercised by . . . *The Bottle* and its sequel. Society, in its daily indulgence, was pervaded by a shock like that from the stroke of a gymnatus. The plates . . . were in the hands of everyone . . . while the more critical scholar . . . was equally moved by the homely pathos of the story.

Cruikshank was not content with the artist’s role of illustrating the effects of drunkenness. As a man he chose to exemplify in his person the virtues of temperance. He gave up all drinking, and smoking, too, and remained a teetotaler during the last thirty-five years of his life. He went further, and lectured on temperance formally and informally. It was this extreme exemplification, no doubt, that alienated many of his friends who approved in principle the objects of his crusade. Stephens, for example, thought that

His passion for "Temperance" was of course intemperate. It found expression in hundreds of engravings, cuts, drawings and pictures. . . . He—having been a boon companion of a very uproarious and entirely reckless kind, devoted to the “glass,” or rather to the tumbler—suddenly, and with characteristic energy, became an entire teetotaler and violent opponent of practices which he had till then been devoted to.

*The plates from which these reproductions were made are from the collection in the Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.
†STEEVES, FREDERIC G. A Memoir of George Cruikshank. New York; Scribner & Welford, 1891.
‡OP. CIT.
There can be no question that Cruikshank was influenced, in his campaign against drunkenness, by leaders among the increasingly vocal advocates of a new era of temperance, as well as by his own observations of London life. Even the direct inspiration of the designs of The Bottle has been ascribed to one of the literary temperance pamphleteers with whom Cruikshank was associated. A newspaper correspondent* wrote: "Whilst we give all praise to Cruikshank, let us not forget, however, that the leading ideas of the work which has immortalized him were suggested by a poem entitled 'The Blessings of Temperance,' the composition of an old Irish shoemaker named John O'Neill." The same correspondent suggested, too, that the etchings illustrating O'Neill's poem "contained the germs... also of The Drunkard's Children."

The success of The Bottle led Cruikshank to design its sequel The Drunkard's Children, also in eight plates (reproduced herewith†). This second series (1848) was likewise well received by the public, although professional critics regard it as inferior, artistically, to The Bottle.

Whether or not Cruikshank's designs of The Bottle and The Drunkard's Children were intended to illustrate O'Neill's temperance poem, at least one temperance poem was written with the frank purpose of illustrating Cruikshank's designs.‡

Cruikshank's pictorial sermons are of interest to modern students of alcohol problems not only as illustrations of drinking customs and conditions in a past era, but mainly as documents in the history of an attempt in alcohol education. To what, aside from intrinsic merit as works of art, did they owe their popular success? At least a part of their effectiveness must be ascribed to the realistic quality of the story they tell. In spite of the fact that Cruikshank freely used caricature and exaggeration to produce his emotional effects, thoughtful scrutiny does not reveal that he did violence to any essential truth in The Bottle or The Drunkard's Children, unless it be in the wording of one of the explanatory legends that accompany the plates.

In the first plate of The Bottle one sees a comfortable and happy home. The artist has spared no pains to create this pleasing impression;

†For the plates of The Drunkard's Children, from which these reproductions were made, we are indebted to Dr. Clements C. Fry of Yale University.
The Bottle I

The bottle is brought out for the first time: the husband induces his wife "just to take a drop!"
THE BOTTLE III

An execution sweeps off the greater part of their furniture:
they comfort themselves with the bottle.
The Bottle

Unable to obtain employment, they are driven by poverty into the streets to beg; and by this means they still supply the bottle.
THE BOTTLE  V

Cold, misery, and want, destroy their youngest child: they console themselves with the bottle.
The Bottle VII

The husband, in a state of furious drunkenness, kills his wife with the instrument of all their misery.
The father a hopeless maniac.

The son and the daughter in vice and the streets, and has left.

The bottle has done its work; it has destroyed the infant and the mother, it has brought

THE BOTTLE VIII
THE DRUNKARD'S CHILDREN  II

Between the fine flaring gin-palace and the low dirty beer-shop, the boy-thief squanders and gambles away his ill-gotten gains.
THE DRUNKARD'S CHILDREN IV

Urged on by his ruffian companions, and excited by drink, he commits a desperate robbery.—He is taken by the police at a three-penny lodging house.
THE DRUNKARD'S CHILDREN  V

From the bar of the gin-shop to the bar of the Old Bailey it is but one step.
The Drunkard's Children  VI

The drunkard's son is sentenced to transportation for life; the daughter, suspected of participation in the robbery is acquitted. The brother and sister part for ever in this world.
The Drunkard's Children VII

Early dissipation has destroyed the neglected boy.—The wretched convict droops, and dies.
Frenzy, septennial, desolated, and in madness, commits self-murder.

The manic father and the cordial brother are gone—The poor girl, howless.

The drunken children VIII
it is manifest in a wealth of fine touches, down to the sleek and contented pet cat. The one fault here, because it detracts from the "true to life" quality of the entire work, is in the legend—"The bottle is brought out for the first time." It is hard to believe that the typical inebriate career, which the subsequent plates are intended to depict, should start only at this relatively advanced and seemingly well-organized stage in the man's life. One is inclined to think that Cruikshank took the artistic liberty to ignore the more characteristic background in order to introduce both the story and the bottle in a single scene and thus more sharply to contrast the ideal home with what is to follow. In the remaining plates, however, the career of uninterrupted inebriate disaster is traced to its final tragedy in seven steps of inexorable logical sequence.

In the sequel, The Drunkard's Children, Cruikshank takes up where he left off in Plate 8 of The Bottle. Putting the blame, with sound sociological insight, on the hopeless environment and improper rearing of the unfortunate son and daughter of the inebriate, he traces their careers until the boy dies of illness aboard a prison ship and the demoralized girl commits suicide. Even today the pictures speak with such force that they take one right into the midst of the lives of the characters. If one considers that the people Cruikshank drew, by their appearance, seem to be of another world altogether, the genius of the artist who could make them live in another age is forever vindicated.

Cruikshank contributed more than The Bottle and The Drunkard's Children to the temperance cause. Besides the illustrations for O'Neill's poem, already mentioned, he drew the famous Gin Juggernaut, vividly described by Thackeray:*

Gin has furnished many subjects to Mr. Cruikshank, who labours in his own sound and hearty way to teach his countrymen the dangers of that drink. In the "Sketch-Book" is a plate upon the subject, remarkable for fancy and beauty of design; it is called the Gin Juggernaut, and represents a hideous moving palace, with a reeking still at the roof and vast gin-barrels for wheels, under which unhappy millions are crushed to death. An immense black cloud of desolation covers over the country through which the gin monster has passed, dimly looking through the darkness whereof you see an agreeable prospect of gibbets with men dangling, burnt houses, &c. The vast cloud comes sweeping on in the wake of this horrible body-crusher; and you see, by way of contrast, a distant, smiling sunshiny tract of old English country, where gin as yet is not known. The allegory is as good, as earnest, and as fanciful as one of John Bunyan's... .

Perhaps the temperance work for which Cruikshank is most famous is his massive oil painting *The Worship of Bacchus, or the Drinking Customs of Society*, which was hung in the National Gallery and is now in the South Kensington Museum. In this single canvas Cruikshank attempted to tell the whole story of the evils of drunkenness; but this required, for its understanding, a *Key to the Worship of Bacchus*, which Cruikshank published. Many critics wrote unkindly of this painting as a work of art, but it undoubtedly served the educational purposes intended by the artist. The National Temperance Publication Society, recognizing its value for their cause, assumed its publication and distributed widely copies of Cruikshank’s etching from the painting, together with the *Key*.

**Mark Keller**