

On Wit, Irony, and Living With Imperfection

How Britain Said No to Abstinence

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Christian perfection, the evangelical doctrine that gave rise to abstinence as it is understood and practiced in America, originated in Britain with John Wesley and the Methodists. We examine why that doctrine floundered in its country of origin, opening the door to a more pluralistic and evidence-based approach to problems such as alcohol and drug abuse. Although social and political factors were important (the stratification of British society stood in the way of holding everyone to the same moral standard, and the drink trade was far better organized than its American counterpart), Britain's intellectual elite also played a vital role, heaping ridicule on the temperance movement and subjecting it to a devastating critique. (*Am J Public Health*. 2008;98:814–822. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2007.117226)

AMERICAN TEMPERANCE

reformers were forever being disappointed by their European counterparts. It baffled them that perfectly intelligent people could read the same science and the same statistics and yet fail to see that the only possible solution was abstinence for everyone. The French, who waited until 1916 to ban distilled liquors in kindergartens and primary schools, were a lost cause.¹ But even the British, the people Americans most admired, were never fully on board. How could the Church of England Temperance Society, formerly the Church of England Total Abstinence Society, throw open its door to nonabstainers

(something it did in 1872) and still say it stood for temperance?² How could the United Kingdom Alliance, a temperance organization committed to prohibition, take money from people who had no intention of becoming teetotalers?³ How could Frederic William Farrar (1831–1903), the author of the bestselling *Life of Christ* (1874), sign a teetotal pledge and then say he had no quarrel with “those who think that a little wine is conducive to their happiness or necessary to their health?”⁴

That British reformers had started from the same premise, Christian perfection as it had been handed down by Methodist minister John Wesley, merely added insult to injury. Their words were the same, and yet their goals were always subtly different. Even Josephine Butler (1828–1906) was not all she appeared to be. Her life's work, realized in 1886, was the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (which subjected prostitutes in port and garrison towns to routine medical inspections). Her hero was William Lloyd Garrison,

and she liked to call herself an abolitionist.⁵ Butler's focus was in fact exceedingly narrow, the exact opposite of the “Do Everything” philosophy of the American Frances Willard (1839–1898) and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.⁶ Unlike her American counterparts, Butler had no interest in criminalizing nonmarital sex.⁷ She was also chary of the temperance movement: she herself was not a teetotaler, and in 1897, after a highly publicized falling-out with Lady Isabella Somerset (1851–1921), the president of the British Women's Temperance Association, she resigned her position in the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union.⁸ Somerset, in turn, ran into difficulties when she proposed to broaden her association's mandate to include such issues as workers' rights, opium addiction, and social purity.⁹

British reformers were not only more narrowly focused than their American counterparts, they were also likelier to accept imperfect outcomes. Butler, who consistently refused to compromise with her opponents, was the

great exception. Everywhere else one finds Britons taking a more roundabout path to their goals. Slavery was abolished in 1833, but the slaves themselves were not fully emancipated until 1838. England's Vice Society was more lackadaisical than the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, Anthony Comstock's (1844–1915) pet project. Or so one might infer from the volume of smut each organization impounded.¹⁰ The British medical establishment was less horrified by masturbation.¹¹

But nowhere were the differences more apparent than in the two countries' approaches to the age-old problem of drunkenness. The British had their own temperance movement, which for the first three decades of its existence gave every appearance of marching in lockstep with its American counterpart, going through the same phases at roughly the same time—abandoning moderation for teetotalism in the 1830s, abandoning suasion for coercion in the early 1850s. In both countries, moreover, there was the same clustering of temperance with other radical causes—most notably with abolitionism, feminism, and vegetarianism.¹²

The turning point came in 1851, when Maine became the first state in America to ban all sales of liquor (the notorious Maine Law). This was followed, in 1853, by the appearance of a new temperance organization in Britain: the United Kingdom Alliance. Headquartered in Manchester, it was far better organized than its predecessors. It was also far more militant, for its stated goal, the “suppression of the traffic in all intoxicating liquors,” amounted to prohibition.¹³ The legislative remedy the alliance backed, the local

veto, proposed to accomplish this by drying up the nation one town at a time. The decision was left to the towns' ratepayers, two thirds of whom had to vote against issuing any liquor licenses. Whether the local veto would eventually have resulted in nationwide prohibition is debatable. There was no guarantee that all towns would go along, and each ban, moreover, was binding for three years only.

The mere threat of American-style prohibition, remote and unlikely though it was, was enough to doom the local veto each time it was floated in Parliament.

When the bill was first introduced, in 1864, it was resoundingly defeated, by 282 votes to 35, and while subsequent votes were closer, the Alliance, after more than six decades of lobbying and petitioning, would have just one thing to show for its efforts: the passage, in 1913, of a bill giving Scottish towns the local veto.

What went wrong? Otherwise put, why did the temperance movement encounter so little resistance in America and so much in Britain? This is an old question, and there is no shortage of good answers.¹⁴ The most obvious, one historians keep returning to, is political: America's governmental structure was far more decentralized, allowing temperance reformers to postpone a showdown at the federal level while steadily advancing their agenda at the local and state levels. Just as importantly, the nonconformists—religious dissenters who did not belong to the Church of England, and the group most associated with temperance in Victorian Britain—remained outside the political mainstream, and their inexperience cost them dearly each time they tried to advance their agenda through Parliament. The structural variables

were also all wrong; the drink trade was more entrenched and better organized, while the rural population, the biggest supporter of prohibition in America, was in Britain its biggest enemy.

These explanations, compelling though they are, skirt the larger question of why the ideal of the temperance movement, universal abstinence, sparked so little enthusiasm in Britain. For without that vital spark the movement could never quite get off the ground. What was missing, in short, was a commitment to Christian perfection in its most rigorous—and most

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Nothing illustrates the point as well as tea. For a long time, American temperance reformers were dead set against this mild beverage, and it is not until well into the 19th century that one starts to find people like Frances

Willard drinking it without guilt.¹⁵ The objection, one that took its cue from the Oberlin perfectionists, was that tea was a stimulant and therefore “inconsistent with perfect temperance.”¹⁶ Ellen G. White (1827–1915), the leading figure in the Seventh-Day Adventist movement, was emphatic on this point: “Tea, coffee, and tobacco, as well as alcoholic drinks, are different degrees in the scale of artificial stimulants.”¹⁷ Or as William Andrus Alcott (1798–1859) put it in his self-help book for young wives, tea stimulated the “brain and nervous system, just as other intoxicating liquors do. And what difference does it make whether the excitement be produced by one drink or another?”¹⁸

To George Gabriel Sigmond, an English doctor and author of *Tea; Its Effects Medicinal and Moral* (1839), it made all the difference in the world. Tea made people “sober, careful and provident.” They worked harder. Their heads were clearer, their minds sharper. In short, they were “healthier, happier, and better,” all because they had “given up a debasing habit for an innocent one.”¹⁹ What Sigmond said British temperance reformers repeated. More than that, they acted on his advice, drinking tea in vast quantities and throwing tea parties to raise money for the cause.

It may be countered that the British had a perfectly corrupt motive for promoting tea (the East India Company) and that the habit was, in any event, past extirpating (only the poorest of the households studied by Marxist writer Friedrich Engels (1880–1895) went without tea, and this with the greatest reluctance).²⁰ All of which is true. But it does not change the fact that the British started from a completely different premise—that

there were many areas of life in which the writ of Christian perfection did not extend (an argument Wesley himself had once made) and that tea was one of them.

THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

There were, of course, pockets of Christian perfection in Victorian Britain—the Primitive Methodists, who had broken with the Methodist Conference early in the century, come first to mind. William and Catherine Booth, the founders of the Salvation Army and easily the most famous teetotalers in late Victorian Britain, were as strict in their personal lives as anyone in America. This was especially true of Catherine. Like William, she had been raised in a strict Methodist home. She fussed when William ate meat, scolded him when he had the occasional glass of wine or port, a habit he gave up entirely when they married.²¹

But even the Primitive Methodists were at first wary of teetotalism. A Brother Marriott was censured in 1840 for “preaching politics and teetotalism at Hyde [Park].” In 1845, a Brother Compton was told that he must not deliver “Teetotal lectures when he should preach the gospel.”²² The official Methodist church, the Connexion, was warier still, consistent with its growing conservatism.²³ When James Caughey (1811–1891), the Irish-born American revivalist, called on British Methodists to embrace teetotalism, the Connexion ordered its chapels closed to teetotal meetings.²⁴

It is also revealing that American revivalists, for all the crowds they attracted in Britain, had little success in getting those same crowds to commit to a life of

Christian perfection.²⁵ Caughey had only 9000 sanctified souls to show for his 6 years in Britain. Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874) could garner only 2287 sanctified souls after preaching nonstop for 4 years (how she arrived at these numbers she does not say). The number of conversions was much higher—perhaps 20 000 for Caughey and exactly 17 643 for Palmer—again suggesting that many were called but few were chosen.²⁶ Both revivalists, moreover, ran into difficulties whenever they went off message and started to espouse temperance as Americans understood it.²⁷ Even Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896), as popular as she was in Britain, alienated many well-wishers whenever she changed the subject from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and abolitionism to the evils of intemperance.²⁸

The results become even more dispiriting when one considers that the Americans were shopping for souls among the Britons who most resembled them, that is, among the Methodists and other nonconformists. Anglican strongholds (the South, London) were a lost cause. But even without these, the potential pool of fellow travelers was vast. This was brought home by the religious census for 1851, which showed that there were nearly as many Christians (48%) outside the Church of England as there were inside it. The established church, moreover, harbored a sizable evangelical wing at this time.²⁹ The Methodists, now split into several factions, were the second largest denomination, accounting for just over 20% of all professed Christians, followed by the Congregationalists at 11% and the Baptists at 8%.³⁰

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

The entrenchment of several distinct classes, each with a competing ideology, was a further impediment to spreading a code that held everyone to the same high moral standards. This is not to say that the American temperance movement operated in a classless society. Far from it. The hero of Justin Edwards's (1787–1853) *Well-Conducted Farm* (1826) was not just anyone: he was a landowner, and the objects of his foray into temperance were the men who worked for him.³¹ But it is fair to say that class divisions were more obvious and less surmountable in Britain than they were in America. The United Kingdom Alliance's own allegiance, to middle-class nonconformists, was clear. But by the same token, it had not one enemy but two: the working classes, who resented any attempt to reform them from above, and the Anglican elites, who resented any attempt to reform them from below.

Nor could those elites ever accept the implications of evangelicalism in its most radical—and most American—form. It is telling that the evangelical reformer William Wilberforce and his Vice Society were not out to reform the morals of the working poor; they were out to reform their *manners*.³² The goal was entirely Pharisaic, for unlike American evangelicalism, it asked only for obeisance—and not for a thoroughgoing transformation and uplifting of the individual. Hence Sydney Smith's (1771–1845) criticism that Wilberforce was doing everything to compel “outward compliance” and nothing to “raise up the inward feeling which secures the outward compliance.”³³

This still does not answer the question of *why* Britons like

Wilberforce set the bar so low. Much of the answer lies in the leveling tendencies of American evangelicalism, in its mistrust of everything that stood between the individual and God—tradition, hierarchy, and learning.³⁴ Small wonder that so many nonconformists were attracted to evangelicalism in its American form. Were they not the victims of privilege, of Parliament, the Church of England (a “thing apart, as distinct from the life of the race as the House of Lords or the monarchy”), and an aristocracy that was as corrupt as it was immoral?³⁵ The result, however, was disastrous for British evangelicals, for in copying the forms more than the substance of American evangelicalism they ended up with the worst of both worlds: their energy never quite equaled the Americans' and yet the association was sufficiently strong to stiffen the resistance of the nation's political and cultural elites.³⁶

RIDICULING THE EVANGELICAL ARGUMENT

That Britain's elites had the political will to block temperance is obvious. Just as importantly, they also had the intellectual wherewithal to deconstruct an argument whose emotional appeal exceeded its intellectual merit. The rhetorical devices they favored, wit and irony, were well suited to the task. Both carried the corrosion of doubt, complexity, and absurdity; both had already been used to undermine the authority of the Church of England; and both would be used again to blunt the twined forces of evangelicalism and temperance.³⁷ Where in antebellum America was there a George Eliot, herself a lapsed evangelical, to deconstruct the most popular evangelical writer of

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her day, a Dickens to parody the sanctimonious Pecksniff, a Mathew Arnold (1822–1888) to remind the public that there was more to life than just God?³⁸ Emerson was too ponderous, Thoreau too serious, Melville too sodden.

The hill was twice as steep in Britain. Not only did the United Kingdom Alliance have to overcome the contempt and apathy of the nation's elites, it also had to endure their barbs, puns, and *bons mots*. The Maine Law was a favorite target. In November of 1851, just after that law had taken effect, *Punch* printed the minutes from a fictional teetotalers' society, noting that the members had met “to enjoy a little excitement derived from hearing everybody abused, instead of from the abuse of fermented liquors.” Mr Belloway spoke, then Messrs Screamer, Earsplit, and Stunner.³⁹ In 1853, *Punch* took on John Gough (1817–1886), the famous temperance lecturer:

If he bears out the reputation he brings with him, his lectures will be no laughing matter; for he is, as it were, pledged to set all the men and women off into so many watering-pots, by drawing from them such a series of wailings and sobs, as will not only drown the voice of the orator, but threaten even to drown those who are assembled to hear him.⁴⁰

When a group of ministers attended a temperance meeting in Birmingham, *Punch* took the occasion to compose a sermon of its

own, reminding its readers that “there are many kinds of intemperance, and not the least disgusting sort is that which blurts forth upon others a stream of fierce and fiery trash.”⁴¹ *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* also weighed in, describing the Maine Law as “unreasonable, tyrannical, and unconstitutional.”⁴² *The Manchester Guardian* dismissed it as ineffective and counterproductive.⁴³ *The News of the World* reprinted *Punch’s* many witticisms, and on a scarcely more serious note, reported how easy it was to get a drink in Maine, law or no law.⁴⁴

But it was the London *Times*, in volume no less than venom, that

withering. It appeared in the same issue, and was twice as long as the letter that had provoked it. The letter’s writer was accused of being unsubtle to the point of stupidity, of “always pushing admissions to their consequences,” of not letting “you rest till he has fixed you either in the clouds or in the pit. He sees only one line, up and down, and you are a fool if you don’t make an absolute decision to go one way or the other.”⁴⁷

The following year, in 1857, the *Times* gleefully reported the defection of Joseph Barker (1806–1875), “who for so many years advocated temperance and the Maine Law.” A chastened

which savors in the smallest degree of cunning or duplicity.” The ideal husband was no less dour. He shunned people who told dirty jokes, told no jokes of his own, and avoided “at all times, and in all places and circumstances, every appearance of evil.”⁴⁹

Nothing the Americans said seemed to move the British intelligentsia. Their words were too earnest, their stories too mawkish, their prayers too sincere. *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* went so far as to deconstruct one of “their tearful tales.” It was all about a boy who had bought rum not once but “as many as ten or a dozen times.” In the original, the boy’s story reduces the grown men who hear it to tears. *Blackwood’s* editors were made of sterner stuff:

This, we believe, is what in literary criticism is called spasmodic, and in theatrical criticism, melodramatic. It is the expression of a strong sentiment without a cause: it is feeling without a base of reality. If people go off into the melting mood, and waste away in tears when they learn that a little boy bought rum for his father on a Sunday, what is to become of them before the greater calamities of life?⁵⁰

THE SECULAR COUNTERARGUMENT

Had the war of words been waged by wits and wags alone, the cause of temperance might conceivably have made more progress in Britain. But there were also perfectly thoughtful people who objected to holding an entire society to a single—and exceedingly narrow—code of conduct. Most of all, they objected to the evangelicals’ conviction that they and they alone were in possession of the truth.

They did more than object: they offered a viable alternative.

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outdid everyone else: “The drunkard has his drawl, the puritan his whine, and the teetotaler, and others of his class, have their long stream of watery prose, trickling so tediously that you never know when you got to the last drop”; “to moralize is one thing; to fill the frothed tankard is another”; and so on.⁴⁵ In October 1856, the *Times* alarmed its readers with news that certain people in Gloucester had met to lobby for the “adoption of the Maine Law in this country.”⁴⁶ When a member of the United Kingdom Alliance wrote an impassioned letter to the editor, defending the Maine Law and urging the notoriously Tory newspaper to lend its support to “this great social reform,” the response was both immediate and

Barker was quoted as saying that the Maine Law was a “failure in America,” and that “nothing but moral suasion [would] make a people sober, good, and happy, either here or in any other country.”⁴⁸

The ridicule that was heaped on the British temperance movement had no counterpart in antebellum America. Nor could it, what with the quintessentially Jacksonian mistrust of anyone who was idle, facile, or conspicuously educated—in short, of anyone who aspired to belong to the chattering classes. William Andrus Alcott’s ideal wife was none of these things, cultivating instead “great plainness of language, dress and manners—an entire artlessness and freedom from everything

If the evangelicals offered a religion that made a virtue of certitudes, British thinkers would offer a philosophy that made a virtue of pluralism and doubt. The more ideas the merrier; the more points of view, the richer society was for it. This was one of the key points in Mathew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1867–1868). In it he took aim at the nonconformists, accusing them of pursuing religion to the exclusion of everything else. Religion was important to Arnold (he is short on specifics), but not all-encompassing. There were whole areas of life where its writ did not extend, most notably to the thing that he valued most: the arts. And that, in Arnold's estimation, was where the nonconformists had failed. They had “developed one side of their humanity at the expense of all others,” so much so that they had become “incomplete and mutilated men.”⁵¹

Arnold did not take on the temperance movement per se. That task fell to an even more formidable thinker: John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). In 1855, when the United Kingdom Alliance still had hopes of crafting a Maine Law for Britain, Mill started work on an essay that posed a fundamental question: how far can society go in regulating the behaviors and morals of its members? By the time his essay *On Liberty* appeared, in 1859, prohibition was no longer a threat in Britain. But what Mill did, perhaps better than anyone before or since, was to question the very notion of moral certitude.⁵² Where the proponents of prohibition had offered their followers one way toward one goal, Mill made the case for a healthy competition among ideas, arguing that “only through diversity of opinion is there, in the existing state of human intellect, a

chance of fair play to all sides of the truth.” In doing so, he rejected the very basis of Judeo-Christian morality: truth, no less than human behavior, could not be defined in absolute terms, and was instead “a question of the reconciling and combining of opposites.” The freedom to think as one pleased went hand in hand with the freedom to do as one pleased, providing only that one's actions did not harm others.⁵³

Mill reserved his harshest criticism for the alliance, holding it up as an example of what can happen when one group attempts to impose its morality on everyone else.⁵⁴ Warning that it was “by no means impossible that persons of these sentiments may at some time or other command a majority in Parliament,” he asked,

How will the remaining portion of the community like to have the amusement that shall be permitted to them regulated by the religious and moral sentiments of the stricter Calvinists and Methodists? Would they not, with considerable peremptoriness, desire these intrusively pious members of society to mind their own business? This is precisely what should be said to every government and every public, who have the pretension that no person shall enjoy any pleasure which they think wrong.⁵⁵

On Liberty is not a work of systematic philosophy. It is an essay, passionate, polemical, and not entirely logical. At what point do an individual's actions cross the line and cause harm to others? Where does the state draw the line between taxing liquor and deliberately limiting its consumption? Mill provides no satisfactory answers. Nor could he after saying that all ideas—and by inference all solutions—were relative.

What Mill did provide was a secular counterargument to the perfectionism that is at the heart

of American evangelicalism and its particular understanding of abstinence. Just as importantly, Mill offered a definition of freedom that was fundamentally opposed to that of the American evangelicals. Where Mill banished virtue from his system, identifying any attempt to impose it as a threat to freedom, American reformers gave it pride of place. The individual was free *only* to be good, a definition that flung open the door to placing roadblocks in the way of his or her being bad.⁵⁶

This was the only solution that the residents of Cedarville, the fictional setting for *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1854), could come up with after several of their neighbors had succumbed to drink. In the novel's last chapter, Joe Morgan, Cedarville's only reformed drunkard, convinces everybody that there is “but one remedy”: “The accursed traffic must cease among us. You must cut off the fountain, if you would dry up the stream. If you would save the young, the weak, and the innocent—on you God has laid the solemn duty of their protection—you must cover them from the tempter.” Anticipating that some people might not like having restrictions placed on their freedom, Morgan tells the townspeople that virtue must take precedence over freedom. Who, he asks, “has any right to sow disease and death in our community? The liberty, under sufferance, to do so, wrongs the individual who uses it, as well as those who become his victims.”⁵⁷

THE FABIAN CONTRIBUTION

One of the people who grew up reading Mill was Isabella Somers-Cocks, the future Lady Isabella Somerset and president of

the British Women's Temperance Association from 1890 until her ouster in 1903. Lady Isabella is the great figure of the British temperance movement in its twilight years, the person who tried and failed to save it by steering it in a more moderate direction. Separated from her husband and cut by society, she embarked on a spiritual odyssey that would take her from one truth to another, each step taking her farther from the moral absolutes of evangelical Protestantism. That she became the president of a temperance organization—and lasted as long as she did—was a lapse of the first order, for she never believed in universal abstinence, the ultimate goal of the British temperance movement and the immediate goal of its American counterpart.

Lady Isabella's foray into temperance began in the 1880s, when she started dabbling in Methodism. It was at this time that she signed a teetotal pledge. Even this she did with a certain flippancy, treating herself to one last glass of port before taking the plunge. Nor, after that momentous step, did she stop serving wine to those of her guests who wanted it.⁵⁸ At no time did she show her hand more clearly than in 1897, when she went before the Royal Commission on the Licensing Laws and said that she had no intention of imposing abstinence on anyone. Did she think that "simply drinking by itself is wrong?" the commission wanted to know. She did not. Did she "wish to make everybody a teetotaler?" She did not. Did she favor "Prohibition by act of Parliament?" She did not.⁵⁹ To change one's mind (which she did on numerous occasions), to change one's religion (which she also did, switching from Anglicanism to Methodism and back again), to

limit one's weapons to suasion—all marked her as a true disciple of John Stuart Mill. If she had a motto it was the one that appears in the biography written by her secretary, Kathleen Fitzpatrick in 1923: "We must never think we cannot hold two inconsistent views."⁶⁰

In 1893, Lady Isabella, having long since concluded that the drink problem could not be solved without first doing something about poverty, joined the Fabian Society. Frances Willard, now her constant companion, also joined at this time.⁶¹ The gesture's significance was twofold. It repudiated the old temperance equation (that it was drunkenness that caused poverty and not the other way around), and it signaled a willingness to entertain solutions that fell short of prohibition. This was true especially of Lady Isabella, but an element of doubt had by now also crept into Willard's thinking, for in these, the final years of her life, she found herself increasingly at odds with the hardliners in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. There was much unhappiness when she cautiously endorsed the idea of regulating sales of alcohol, if only as an intermediate step toward their eventual elimination.⁶²

This small step backward also placed her at odds with Christian socialism in its American form (the Social Gospel). Its leading lights, Washington Gladden (1836–1918), Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918), and Josiah Strong (1847–1916), remained committed to prohibition, and while they were critical of the idea of individual sanctification, a lingering perfectionism can be detected in everything they themselves refused to do—to compromise, to fix just a few things at a

time, to accept that change was something that might be achieved through small steps rather than all at once.⁶³ One must look long and hard to find common ground with their contemporaries among the Fabians. How many American reformers believed in the "inevitability of gradualism" (Sidney Webb's famous phrase) or that "moderate reforms" were preferable to "heroic remedies" when it came to reducing drunkenness?⁶⁴

That the Fabians could even talk about reducing drunkenness (as opposed to eliminating it altogether) spoke to an unbridgeable divide. The Fabians' studiousness, their penchant for going back to the archives and undertaking fact-finding trips, was yet another rebuke to the American approach, for it made facts—and not abstract principles—the touchstone for reform.⁶⁵ The Webbs wrote a whole *History of Liquor Licensing in England* (1903). Edward Pease (1857–1955) felt unable to comment on the subject without first summarizing what had been tried in other countries—hence the lengthy preamble that appears in Fabian Tract 85, otherwise known as *Liquor Licensing at Home and Abroad*. The same impulse lay behind the exhaustive studies undertaken by Joseph Rowntree (1836–1925) and Arthur Sherwell—*The Temperance Problem and Social Reform* in 1899, *Public Control of the Liquor Traffic* in 1903, *The Taxation of the Liquor Trade* in 1906. Only the New York–based Committee of Fifty, with its study groups and criticisms of prohibition, could match this level of critical enquiry, and even here there was considerable dissent from within the ranks, most notably from Gladden and Harvard's Charles W. Eliot (1834–1926).⁶⁶

It was the Fabians who gave Britain a way forward, if only indirectly. They wanted to do so many more things than they did, to municipalize the drink trade, along with just about everything else—milk, bread, fire insurance, bathhouses, and burials.⁶⁷ They dreamt of building "people's palaces" that would compete with the pubs by offering wholesome entertainments and uplifting lectures, on science, mechanical inventions, history, biography, and travel. Precious little came of these schemes. The Fabians' contribution lay elsewhere: in their underlying assumptions. Where the temperance crusaders talked about solving problems, the Fabians talked about managing them. Most importantly, they were receptive to trying several different things at the same time, and that, more than anything they taught or believed, was the highest tribute they could have paid to John Stuart Mill.

IS AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH THE RIGHT APPROACH?

The idea that there can be more than one response to a problem lives on in the British National Health Service's approach to alcohol abuse. Abstinence remains the ideal, but controlled drinking, an imperfect and riskier outcome, is offered as an alternative in most British treatment facilities.⁶⁸

Variety—sobriety for those who are up to the challenge, harm reduction for those who are not—is also the hallmark of the services available to drug addicts.⁶⁹ The same principle can be detected in the Rolleston Report (1926), which upheld the right of physicians to prescribe opiates to addicts who cannot or will not abstain. A more careful reading

shows that what its authors were really recommending was a two-tiered approach: complete withdrawal whenever possible, and maintenance only after every effort “has been made, and made unsuccessfully, to bring the patient to a condition in which he is independent of the drug.”⁷⁰

There is just one problem. The British, for all their much-vaunted reasonableness, have been no more successful than the Americans in stemming drug and alcohol abuse. Heroin dependence, once a rarity in Britain, is now just as common there as it is in America.⁷¹ Nor have the British had any better luck with alcohol. Their rates of alcohol dependence, although measured by different criteria, are roughly comparable to those of Americans (6.9% as opposed to 4.6%), while their rates of abstention are far lower (12% as opposed to just under 39%).⁷² Nor, with the recent relaxation in opening hours (the Licensing Act of 2003), are there any immediate prospects for improvement.⁷³

The reality is that the range of options for managing alcohol and drugs is small, and that all—abstinence, prohibition, and different combinations of regulations—have been tried. Only one, abstinence, can be said to work in its entirety, and then only for motivated individuals. Nor do attempts to match alcoholics with individually tailored treatments seem to have a significant effect on the outcome, making this a case where motivation trumps theory.⁷⁴ Mill’s model, in other words, is a poor one for alcohol and drug problems. It assumes that there is a crowded marketplace of good ideas (which in this case there is not) and that the best one will eventually emerge after a fair fight. A century and a half

later, it is perhaps time to say that a better idea has not come along because it does not exist. ■

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Contributors

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