

Liquid Pleasures: a Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain

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Over the last thirty years, there has been a phenomenal rise in the number of soft drinks consumed in Britain. Although many commercial sugar-based beverages were first developed around the mid- to late-nineteenth century, it was not until the 1960s and the initial mass popularity of Coca Cola that cold, non-alcoholic, bottled drinks began to constitute a substantial proportion of the total number of drinks consumed. By 1995, around 20 per cent of all drinks bought in this country were soft drinks. According to John Burnett, this trend represents a 'cold drinks revolution', a transformation in our *Liquid Pleasures* comparable in scale to the 'hot beverages revolution' of the late-seventeenth century.

What becomes apparent throughout Burnett's welcome and authoritative volume is that Britain's drinking habits have always been subject to rapid change. Over the last few centuries there has been nothing stable or traditional in the manner in which people have drunk. Beers and ales have undergone continual development, from the introduction of bitter-tasting hops in the fifteenth century to the popularity of commercially-brewed porter in the eighteenth century. The importation of the exotic caffeine-based drinks of tea and coffee in the seventeenth century marked, anticipated and perhaps even encouraged the profound social changes associated with the rise of the middle class in the eighteenth century. The industrial revolution brought about several changes, from the confirmation of cheap tea as a universal drink, to the decline of privately-brewed beer and the re-emergence of gin palaces in the 1830s, a hundred years after the spirit had first prompted Hogarth's famous prints. At the same time urbanisation and declining living standards reduced the amount of milk consumed and folk recipes such as small beer were forgotten, replaced with the new commercial soft drinks manufactured by Robinsons and Schweppes. Rising incomes at the turn of the twentieth century encouraged the growth of a leisure industry which forced the pub to compete with the music hall, the football ground and, eventually, the cinema, distractions which led to a long-term fall in beer sales. Governments also intervened to follow up their purification of the water supply with an encouragement of milk consumption. As John Burnett so convincingly emphasises, none of these drinks can be studied in isolation, the history of each demonstrating the fluctuating patterns of demand borne of the competition that has always existed between rival *Liquid Pleasures*.

Despite such an emphasis on the inter-related history of different drinks, Burnett's vast range of material has forced him to adopt a structure in which each drink is examined in a separate chapter, before a conspectus draws out the major themes. Within each chapter there is sufficient material for a separate monograph,⁽¹⁾ as Burnett skillfully and entertainingly recounts the story of water, milk, tea, coffee, soft drinks, beer, wine and spirits from their early origins through to the present day. Each chapter is organised according to similar principles, with Burnett usually beginning by outlining the early history of the drink, before detailing its relationship to the 'hot beverages revolution' of the late seventeenth century and the changed social structures of the eighteenth. The industrial revolution always looms large in each narrative as does the question of adulteration and government intervention, issues present in Burnett's previous work.⁽²⁾ The commercial changes of the new mass consumer society are then outlined, before each chapter finishes with a sketch of changing post-war patterns of consumption.

Such a history lends itself to anecdote and Burnett nicely blends the illuminating example with his clear descriptions of the economic data of demand. Thus, in his discussion of small beer we learn that nettle beer was popular in Lancashire and bog wortle in Yorkshire; that beer drinkers used to prefer a mixture of a sweet heavy ale, a lighter hopped beer and a weaker table beer, a blend which encouraged the commercial development of porter which to some degree matched the taste of the three combined; that Samuel Pepys variously drank ale, wine, claret, orange juice and champagne for breakfast; that 'taking the waters', or visiting a spa town, usually meant drinking water rather than bathing in it; that foundrymen and forgers working in temperatures of 90-140°F could get through from 8 to 24 pints of weak homebrew per shift; and that Georgian physicians held that 'saline waters had valuable purgative effects, chalybeate waters containing iron had tonic and restorative properties, sulphur waters were good for the skin and complexion, while others were claimed to cure gout, stone and rheumatism' (p. 10). Such close attention to detail is matched by a broad understanding of historical context which makes for some excellent interpretative speculations. For instance, in discussing the falling rates of milk consumption in the early nineteenth century, Burnett sees fit to mention that the protective Corn Laws encouraged the cultivation of land rather than the grazing of dairy cattle, thus reducing the milk supply. More imaginatively, he argues persuasively for an attention to physical environment in explaining demand. While here we might all be familiar with the argument that poor quality housing encouraged many men to stay in the public house, Burnett also argues that the land enclosures reduced the supply of free wood available to working-class homes with the consequence that both home baking and home brewing were discouraged.

The strength of Burnett's work lies in its authoritative account of the separate histories of water, milk, tea, coffee, soft drinks, beer, wine and spirits. He manages to condense a wealth of information into clear,

engaging essays which, by examining drink throughout the 'modern' period of history (1650 to the present), identify the more important trends and fluctuations in consumption. He has combined an extensive knowledge of the secondary literature with much archival research, producing, in his chapter on beer drinking at least, a much needed history of a central aspect of British popular culture which has been long overdue. He combines economic, social and cultural history and stresses throughout the importance of political factors to this history as well. He thus follows a recent trend in the study of consumer society which has looked to the role of the state in influencing demand, though his previous work on adulteration and government legislation might be seen to have preceded this type of analysis.⁽³⁾ For instance, in his chapter on milk, he emphasises the importance of fears over physical degeneration which prompted the Edwardian governments to form Infant Welfare Centres and Milk Depots where mothers could obtain bottles of sterilised milk at 2d. for a day's supply. Such intervention in consumption set important precedents for the role of the welfare state which would be followed by the establishment of the Milk Marketing Boards in 1933 and the provision of free school milk from 1946. In other chapters, too, Burnett describes the role of government in, for example, the retail licensing of tea, in the setting of high excise duties for coffee, in the regulation of drinking hours in pubs and in the municipalisation of the water supply following a series of cholera epidemics in the mid-nineteenth century.

The stated approach of Burnett is to examine the history of drinks beyond any purely realist notions of physiological need or innate desire. He claims that he wishes to give attention to economic considerations while accepting that economic historians have looked too much at supply. Instead, referring to the sociological and anthropological literature of Grant McCracken and Mary Douglas, he argues for a study of drinks that accepts that consumption is a consequence of society as well as being constitutive of it. This is hardly a novel argument within material cultural studies, but Burnett deserves considerable praise for offering a history in which a rich economic narrative of demand statistics is located within a broad social, if not always cultural, context. Thus, in his chapter on spirits, he is able to argue that the three most important factors in understanding their role in the nineteenth century are firstly, that whisky (in Scotland) and gin (in England) were antidotes to the psychological and physical pressures of industrial life; secondly, that spirits came under moral and religious attack from the temperance campaign from as early as 1828; and, thirdly, that consumption was, and must always be, determined by price.

Burnett's preference for the economic or materialist interpretation really comes through in his conspectus. The vast majority of his overall explanation for the changing history of drinks is devoted to 'material reasons': that supply had to be there in the first place; that demand had to be affordable; that physical conditions were important to consumption; that environmental factors influenced both demand and supply; and that the role of the state was crucial. These are all extremely important considerations and need to be stressed in any history of consumption, but the emphasis he places on them makes it disappointing that the 'non-material reasons' are not explored further. These cultural issues are summarised in just one paragraph:

Drinks are consumed not only, or even mainly, because they are available and affordable: they have to be desired and enjoyed. Alcoholic drinks have always contributed to conviviality, celebration and festivity, and through their varying rituals confirmed membership and fellowship within groups: beer and wine represented differences in social status but shared the common element of sociability, 'the framework and introduction for conversation and conviviality'. While alcohol in moderation liberated the drinker from mundane restraints and anxieties, the adoption of the caffeine drinks depended on a different set of social attributes. It was initially important that they were expensive novelties, which thereby defined the social superiority of users: they announced status publicly, and were 'in the fashion' as markers of modernity at a time of new thought in art, science and politics. It was probably not so important in the first place that these drinks were immediately enjoyed as they were seen to be consumed. The reason why caffeine drinks were adopted by the bourgeoisie were somewhat different. Social emulation was doubtless important for some people, but tea and coffee for this class carried other meanings, of sobriety and seriousness, increasing mental activity without the impairing effects of alcohol. In the Age of Enlightenment it was a rational use of time for men to drink these beverages,

for women part of 'the civilising process' that was bringing more polite manners and gentler relationships into domestic life. Louis Lewin believed that caffeine could 'sterilise nature and extinguish carnal desires': certainly, it did not stimulate sexual virility of physical passion. As tea later moved into mass consumption it lost its original associations with novelty and luxury to become, above all, the drink of morality and respectability, firmly linked with the religious revival and the temperance movement and, more generally, with Victorian values of work, thrift and sobriety. [188-9]

While the material explanations offered in his conspectus are a summary of the excellent accounts provided in the separate chapters these non-material factors were not explored by any means as thoroughly; a cultural studies scholar would be able to conjure up a book from every one of the above sentences.

Liquid Pleasures fulfils its primary task of presenting an entertaining, general, informative and authoritative history of drinks in Britain. Where further research might be conducted is on these more cultural issues, though one might suggest that Burnett himself ought to have incorporated them more thoroughly if he really is committed to emphasising the cultural context of the economic act of consumption. One explanation for the lack of an overarching culturalist interpretation is that Burnett's subject matter is defined purely by its physical properties: water, milk, tea, coffee, soft drinks, beer, wines and spirits appear together purely because they are liquids. They are not linked according to some psychological or cultural property such as that found in Goodman, Lovejoy and Sherratt's history of drugs, or what they crucially term, 'psychoactive substances' (including caffeine), which then lends itself to an analysis of the centrality of a particular type of consumption to everyday life.(4)

Of the general interpretative frameworks that are employed, the importance of the physical environment might warrant further attention. For instance, Burnett does make use of the material collected by Mass-Observation, but much more might be made of this organisation's anthropology of behaviour in pubs, especially in regard to the preferences for particular types of beer, the social and cultural dynamics involved in the different rooms of the pub (the vaults, snug, bar and saloon), and the weekly rhythms of drinking rituals according to the day of the week.(5) Similarly, Burnett does make mention of the coffee houses of the eighteenth century but, given the reference to rationality and 'the Age of Enlightenment', it is surprising that no mention is made of civil society and the public sphere, even if they were only included to dismiss some of the more exaggerated claims of Habermas' analysis of the coffee house.(6) Finally, in his description of the milk bars of the 1930s and the espresso bars of the 1950s, more might have been made of the studies of youth culture, particularly those on the use of drinks and commercial commodities within various post-war subcultures.(7) Such close attention to the context of consumption has proved particularly useful in drawing out the relationship between masculinity and femininity in relation to material culture, but these gender issues are also given little attention in *Liquid Pleasures*.(8)

At times, Burnett stresses the importance of advertising in stimulating demand, especially with regard to soft drinks and beer, and he is particularly good at tracing the collective advertising slogans such as 'Drink More Milk' (1922), 'Pinta Milka Day' (1958) and 'Beer is Best' (1933). The literature on advertising in Britain is by no means as comprehensive as that which has recently appeared on America, and it would have been useful for Burnett to have extended his brief analyses to respond to the problematic interpretations so far developed by Loeb and Richards.(9) However, apart from the four postcards which appear on the front cover, there is no presentation of the visual evidence of *Liquid Pleasures*. Had the imagery of drink been studied in more depth then again issues of masculinity and femininity might have been more thoroughly explored as well as the more general issue of identity. Burnett does deal very well with the issue of social status, but drinks have also been used to explore individual identity and to present images of the self to others within one's socio-cultural environment.

Many of these issues may seem peripheral to the author's concerns and he should not be criticised too much for what he has not included, since the socio-economic approach he does offer is largely convincing and a useful corrective to the overtly culturalist turn of many recent studies. However, his realist or material approach does detract from his analysis in a number of ways. One final point that should be mentioned here

is the history of health and medicine offered in the book. While Burnett is very good in outlining the medical properties ascribed to the various drinks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, seeing such health claims as products of their time, he does not pursue the theme, except with a brief mention of advertising. Instead, he too readily accepts the medical evidence of more recent decades and he offers the notion of addiction as an explanation for the growth in coffee consumption [p. 91]. It might be argued that coffee is merely habit forming and that the authority of the claim that it is addictive is dependent on the nature and position of scientific knowledge over the last 150 years.

While this point is an incredibly minor one, what I hope it does is emphasise the fact that many of the interpretations which Burnett offers as real or material, may in fact be the products of historical circumstance. This should not detract from the excellent approach and analysis provided in *Liquid Pleasures*, an approach I think he has been largely correct to adopt. It is mentioned merely to highlight the ways in which the history of drink might be extended. As Burnett himself argues in the introduction: "needs" came to be determined not by physiological requirements but in terms of cultural "wants"[p. 4]. However, in his subsequent and definitive focus on price, supply, environment and the state, his analysis of the 'non material reasons' is by no means as complete.

Notes

1. Indeed, Burnett's work probably anticipates some more detailed studies: W. Gutzke, *Drink in British Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin edn., 1968).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. S. Strasser, C. McGovern & M. Judt, *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998); M. Daunt & M. Hilton (eds), *Material Politics: States, Consumers and Political Cult ures* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Goodman, P. E. Lovejoy & A. Sherrat (eds.), *Consuming Habits: Drugs in History and Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1995).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Mass-Observation, *The Pub and the People: A Worktown Study* (London: Cresset, 1987).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (trans. by Thomas Burger, Oxford: Polity Press, 1992).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See, for example, C. Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life 1860-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); V. De Grazia with E. Furlough (eds), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Pe rspective* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); M. Hilton, *Smoking in British Popular Culture, 1800-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. L. A. Loeb, *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); T. Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (London: Verso, 1991).[Back to \(9\)](#)

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