

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF
COFFEE HOUSES.

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IT seems to be one of the natural consequences of the shortness of human life that we are prone to impatience in viewing the slow progress made by any movement for bettering the mental or moral condition of mankind during the generation in which our lot is cast. This impatience incites over sensitive temperaments to fanaticism, in phlegmatic natures it breeds indifference or despair. Those however, who have learnt in the school of history, who have observed how wide are the cycles of Providence, know that the "process of the suns" is leading mankind onward and upward to happier and nobler conditions of existence, arising out of the "redemption of the body" from the thralldom of the lower nature, and to the victory and supremacy of those higher powers that declare as surely as the starry firmament the glory of God, Whose image they reflect. The object of this paper is not to commend the Coffee House movement to your sympathy, that is involved in your being friends of temperance, nor to suggest plans for its local extension, for that task I lack the requisite wisdom. But I hope to present for your reflection a brief sketch of the early growth of Coffee houses, their features, their lessons, their decline, their relation to earlier temperance work, and their development in recent years. The ground covered is about two centuries, in which brief period a temperance revolution has taken place, full of teaching for the present, and full of inspiring hope for the future. While we do not believe in the power of Coffee Houses to redeem men from the habit of publicly using stimulants, so far as that is desirable, we do know that they have an invaluable capacity for lessening the temptations incident to the public drinking of intoxicants. That is my plea for asking you to observe and to reflect upon their history, for no honorable man in these days can watch the drink evils we so deplore; to use the words of Foster, "As we should behold persons carried down in a mighty torrent where interposition is impossible, or as the Turks look at the progress of a conflagration or an epidemic." (Foster on Popular Ignorance, Ed. 1834, p. 126). As the art of printing in Europe was born in the night of illiteracy, so the Coffee House movement was born in the night of drunkenness. Carlyle warns us against grubbing at the root of a flower instead of enjoying its beauty. But botanists must soil their fingers in searching for facts. He who seeks to know the early life of Coffee Houses will find it an uncleanly task; he will run the risk of being overcome by the stench of stale liquor and clouds of tobacco smoke. Burton, who in his "Anatomy of Melancholy," was the first English writer who mentioned Coffee, tells us, "The Turks drink Coffee for they use no wine."

Had he lived later he might have added, that, Christians drink Coffee to neutralize the effect of excess in drinking wine. The first statement is the prohibitionist's hope as to the results of the Coffee House movement, the other expresses the desire of the moderate wing of the Temperance army. Let me for a moment picture the state of the society when Coffee Houses started. It will be of service as an encouragement. In a poem written about 1703, by Defoe, called "The true born Englishman," he says of our forefathers:

"Good drunken company is their delight;
Drink their estates away, and senses too.
Hell cares not to what deity men pray,
What God they worship, or in what way,
Whether by Luther, Calvin, or by Rome,
They sail by Heaven; by drink hell steers them home."

In No. 41, of Swift's letters to Stella, we read of "Drunken Whiggish Lords, who came into chocolate houses," and, "Prince Eugene dines to-day with several general officers or foreign ministers—they will be all drunk I am sure." In letter 11, this great satirist speaks of himself "taking pills and drinking brandy in the morning." The pills seem to be here misplaced! In Spectator No.—, by Tickell, Sir Roger De Coverley, doubtless a character drawn from life, is shown at supper in a tavern with a lady who "drank a full bottle to her share," the knight standing treat and doubtless taking the extra quantity due his rank and sex! Elsewhere Sir Roger is shown us at home at Christmas, where he celebrated the Incarnation of his Redeemer by encouraging all comers and callers to get drunk. Those were "the good old times" indeed. From the days of Beowulf, the first of English poets, who, twelve centuries ago pictured a nobleman as

"He that bore in his hand the ale mug huge."

To my early days when "drunk as a lord" was in common use, an example of drunkenness was set by the higher classes. We have shown an English or rather Irish Dean addicted to morning drams; in all fairness let us say that there could be quoted from the "History of Glasgow Clubs" and other authorities, proofs that neither the English nor Irish clergy monopolised a prejudice against excessive sobriety!

But while we cannot regard Coffee Houses as the outcome of Temperance sentiment, they had features worth serious notice by those who regard these places as antagonistic to saloons. We have in them the history of an experiment conducted under circumstances essential to the growth and permanence of any enterprise, that is, the business supply of a spontaneous demand. The general establishment of Coffee Houses will never take place as the mere result of zeal for temperance. As the public weary, and sicken of whiskey and beer saloons, the demand for temperance houses will grow. The Coffee House proprietors early last century saw that drink was not the magnet to draw customers to them any more than it was the attraction of taverns. For a bottle drank for liquor's sake, a hogs-head is emptied for love of company. Were

every man compelled to take his whiskey in a room alone, the saloons would waste away. Notice then the social life, attractions and uses of the early Coffee Houses. Observe also the high rank of visitors, showing that there must have been elegant appointments and costly service. In No. 10 of Swift's letters to Stella, he says: "I met Lord Salisbury at the Coffee House;" in No. 13 he alludes also to a painful interview with Addison; letter 3 is dated "Robin's Coffee House;" No. 6 tells of a "letter from Bishop Clogher, received at the Coffee House," and at St. James' Coffee House the Dean baptized a child. In Boswell's Johnson we read: "We concluded the day at the Turk's Head Coffee House very sociably." (1760). Smollett makes Roderic Random in Cap. xlviii, say: "I went to the Bedford Coffee House in the evening where I met my friends. (1748). Swift's cloud of madness throws its first shadow in the words: "I go no more to Coffee Houses." (Letter to Stella, No. 41). But this aspect of the Coffee Houses has been delineated by one of the greatest of the "Old Masters." "Sir Roger asked me if I would smoke a pipe with him over a dish of Coffee at Squires? I accordingly waited on him to the Coffee House. He had no sooner seated himself at the upper end of the high table but he called for a clean pipe, a paper of tobacco a dish of Coffee, a wax candle, and the Supplement, (newspaper), with such an air of cheerfulness and good humour, that all the boys in the Coffee room who seemed to take a pleasure in serving him were at once employed on his several errands, insomuch that nobody else could come at a dish of tea till the knight had got all his conveniences about him."—Spectator, No. 269. It is worth noting here that these incidents, ranging from 1711 to 1760, reveal the existence in England of a charming form of temperance accommodation, which does not exist in Canada to-day, that is, public social life free from the temptations of drink. Let us glance now at another aspect of these houses. Fielding in his masterpiece gives the hero's journal in which occurs the line, "6 to 8 p.m., at Coffee House." as the ordinary custom at the time. In Addison's first Spectator paper he tells of habitual visits to Wills, Child's, St. James', Grecian, and Cocoa Tree. Elsewhere he speaks of visits to nine houses frequented by various classes, who are described as every where sat discussing politics "within the steams of the Coffee Pot." Our politics have a strong smack of the fumes of whiskey! These houses were clearly very lively. Swift writes: "Those who are loud and violent in Coffee Houses do a cause more harm than good," (Memoirs on the Queen's Ministry). That is a valuable hint for all temperance orators. In the Guardian we read of "Minor orators who display their eloquence in Coffee Houses," (No. 84, June 17, 1713). In the Spectator we have allusions to discussions at Coffee Houses on "cards, dice, learning and politics." (see No's. 403, 454). These houses were great news centres. Swift hears "important news" at his Coffee House, (Letter 6, see also Spectator, No. 452). In a letter