



CHAPTER 5

Testing the ‘Character of Drink’

There were many references made throughout the parliamentary enquiries to the type of alcohol sold and consumed within pubs and other drinking places because different types and qualities of alcohol were believed to influence drinking behaviour. The quality of beer, wine and spirits varied enormously and some brewers and publicans used adulterants to enhance the quality, taste or strength of the liquor sold.¹ Joseph Chamberlain read a statement from a Birmingham chemical analyst who had been commissioned to examine the beer sold in certain ‘low class’ public houses

The samples are all very dark in colour, of a harsh disagreeable taste, and unusually bitter. The character of the bitter, which clung persistently to the palate, is altogether unlike the pleasant, transient, aromatic flavour of the hop, of which I believe all, or nearly all, the samples to be entirely innocent. I drank some of each sample and found them all heady in their effects and seemed to dispose of diarrhoea. I have however been unable, by either chemical or other tests to prove the presence of *coccolus indicus*.²

Chamberlain stated that in his opinion, many of the problems of drunkenness could be eradicated by changing ‘the character of the drink which the population consumes.’³ Moreover, he believed that the poorer working classes were so used to consuming poor quality beer that they offered ‘Bass’s best beer’ they would refuse it because the strength of the beer sold in lower-class pubs matched that of spirits such as brandy.⁴

Chamberlain and other witnesses believed that the problems of intemperance extended beyond the types of drinkers or amounts of alcohol consumed to encompass the type and quality of alcohol that was sold to the population.

In the late nineteenth century alcohol was produced on an industrial scale in Britain and those involved in the drink trade benefitted from advances in science and technology that increased productivity and maximised profits. Although this meant wider choice and cheaper prices for alcohol consumers, there were concerns at a political level regarding the quality of alcohol that was sold to the public. Chamberlain stated that the Birmingham analyst strongly suspected the presence of the drug *cocculus indicus* (an intoxicant added to boost the strength of weak beer) and that in his opinion, certain lower-class pubs were selling beer that was 'unduly intoxicating and unwholesome and quite different from genuine ales.'⁵ As Burns notes there was a 'general climate of adulteration' in the late nineteenth century and it was common practice for manufacturers and publicans to add a range of additives to food and drink to either improve the taste or to extract more profit.⁶ Some of these additives were legal and fairly benign in nature but others were potentially toxic and posed a risk to health. The main reasons that manufacturers and publicans had for adulterating alcohol were to improve the taste, appearance and strength of watered down or poor quality beer and spirits or to enhance the taste of 'silent' or 'foreign' spirits that were sold to the public as 'genuine' spirits. Although the 1872 Licensing Act made it an offence to keep or sell adulterated liquor, the practice was still widespread because detection and prosecution were difficult and some publicans were intent on boosting profits with the help of water and chemical additives.⁷

The adulteration of beer by publicans was one concern that featured throughout the parliamentary enquiries. However there was often more attention given to adulterated spirits because of the higher levels of alcohol and intoxication. The 1890 Select Committee on British and Foreign spirits looked at the issue of adulteration and heard evidence from witnesses such as Inland Revenue officials and chemical analysts. The enquiry was concerned with investigating three key issues regarding the production, sale and consumption of spirits in Britain: First was the bonding of spirits for maturity and whether this practice should be made compulsory to ensure the sale of better quality spirits. Second was the blending of spirits produced by patent and pot still distillation derived

from different countries of origin and whether this practice was in the best interests of alcohol consumers. There were questions about the possible health implications of blending spirits and also over the labelling of blended spirits that were composed of different substances. The third issue under investigation was the consumption of intoxicants such as ether, methylated spirits and 'new' spirits that had not been matured and what impact these substances had on public health. The enquiry was conducted with a scientific rigour and chemical analysts were summoned to provide evidence on the distillation process and chemical composition of spirits. The subject of fusel oil featured prominently throughout the enquiry. Fusel oil was a generic name given to a range of chemical constituents sometimes referred to as 'impurities' which were produced by spirit distillation and included amyl-alcohol and other oily compounds. Fusel oil was believed to be present in different amounts and compositions in many alcoholic drinks. It was the amount of fusel oil present that mattered because it was believed to affect the quality and taste of spirits and also the health and behaviour of consumers.

The enquiry heard evidence from two analytical chemists employed by the Inland Revenue and the Board of Customs. These men tested various samples of spirits obtained from distilleries and pubs in order to assess the extent to which methods of distillation and the process of blending and bonding spirits affected the quality, purity, strength and taste of spirits sold to the public. Dr Bell, Principal Chemist of the Inland Revenue Laboratory obtained 51 samples of spirits from working-class pubs situated in the 'lowest parts' of towns in England, Ireland and Scotland. Bell subjected the samples to a chemical analysis and a taste test, which he concluded was 'satisfactory'.⁸ He reported that the spirits sold in public houses were highly rectified (distilled) and of good quality and strength which was indicative of patent still distillation methods. This produced cheap, commercially viable spirits such as gin and whisky but also produced a 'silent spirit' or 'German spirit'⁹ that could be mixed with other alcoholic drinks such as brandy, whisky and sherry to produce 'fake' spirits. Bell argued that from his perspective as a chemist cheap patent still spirits and 'fake' spirits were of a sufficient quality, strength and purity to pose no hazard to public health. However the Committee were not satisfied with his conclusions and pressed him to state for the record if he believed that 'fake' French brandy, Scotch whisky or West Indian rum were better than the genuine articles.¹⁰ Bell stated that the preference for 'fake' or 'real' spirits was purely a matter

of consumer taste and that in his opinion the public preferred less highly flavoured spirits produced by patent still production and by blending cheap 'silent' spirit with more expensive 'real' spirits.¹¹ Bell gave the impression that he did not think the public were being duped either in terms of taste or quality by cheap, mass produced blended spirits. However, the persistent line of questioning from the Committee suggested that they thought otherwise.

At one point the committee presented Bell with a glass of Scotch and a glass of Irish whisky purchased from the House of Commons bar. Bell was asked to test the whiskies in order to establish their point of origin—i.e. patent or pot still distillation and to test the quality and purity of the drinks. In 1890 James Buchanan & Co. had the contract to sell blended Scotch whisky in the Houses of Parliament so presumably the glass of Scotch was Buchanan's blended whisky and the glass of Irish whisky was most likely a single malt whisky produced by traditional pot still methods. This whisky test was seemingly conducted in order to aid the committee's deliberations over the correct labelling of spirits and to establish if labels should state the country of origin. However, the line of questioning leading up to the whisky test constantly pressed Bell for his opinions on which types of alcohol were 'better'—British or foreign, patent or pot still, blended or single malt whiskies, bonded or 'new' spirits.¹² There was a sense that the committee members were approaching the subject not only from a political standpoint but also as alcohol consumers. They were either reluctant to accept Bell's view that there was little difference in the quality of single malt or blended whisky or perhaps they just wanted to know exactly what they were drinking.

The second analytical chemist that gave evidence to the 1890 enquiry was Mr Cobden Samuel, the principal analyst of the Customs Laboratory. Cobden Samuel conducted experiments on himself using samples of spirits containing different levels of fusel oils in order to investigate the physical effects of drinking spirits produced by different distillation and blending methods. Over a period of days he regularly consumed quantities of 'genuine' 15-year-old brandy to which he added commercial fusel oil. He reported no ill effects and stated that his appetite and urine were normal. He then consumed quantities of 'pure' spirits with little or no fusel oil or 'impurities' present and reported that after a few days he began to feel unwell and suffered frequent headaches, tightness in the chest and acute attacks of indigestion.¹³ He, therefore, concluded that 'plain' or 'silent' spirits were in fact injurious to health

in their pure form and that the presence of 'impurities' or fusels oil in spirits was beneficial not only in terms of health but also in terms of the quality and taste of spirits. Cobden Samuel essentially refuted Bell's evidence by arguing that 'genuine' spirits containing fusel oil and impurities produced by traditional methods, were better for health than 'fake' or 'silent' spirits produced by commercial patent still methods. Cobden Samuel attributed the headaches he experienced after drinking silent spirits to the 'maddening' effects of new spirits which were believed to produce erratic, volatile and sometimes violent behaviour.¹⁴

The links between alcohol consumption and behaviour was a common theme throughout the parliamentary enquiries. Many witnesses believed that the cheap alcohol sold and consumed in lower working class areas was either adulterated beer or mass produced poor quality spirits and the effects of consumption were drunken and sometimes violent or criminal behaviour. The committees often returned to questions about certain types of alcohol inducing more or less drunkenness and whether there were any medical benefits to be gained from moderate drinking. At the 1877 enquiry, Thomas Lauder Brunton, a doctor and lecturer in *Materia Medica* at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London was asked if he believed that a glass of wine or spirits taken in moderation might be useful in the case of impaired digestion. He agreed that it was very useful and that: 'a man working hard all day has an exhausted stomach that is slow to digest food and a glass of wine speeds digestion'.¹⁵ Brunton also stated that alcohol was a useful medicine in treating fevers and as an aid to insomnia. When asked about the types of alcohol used by doctors Brunton stated that he prescribed only 'good wine' or 'pure wine' because these left no bad effects afterwards.¹⁶ Another doctor that gave evidence was Sir William Gull who was consulting physician at Guy's Hospital in London. Gull was asked if he would recommend that men working outdoors in hard physical labour should consume small amounts of 'nutritious light beer.' and replied

I think some stomachs have more power to consume common food, while others want food more highly prepared. I do not think at present, from our knowledge, we should be prepared to say that everybody could go without beer. It is a food of a light kind.¹⁷

Although Gull believed that working-class labourers benefitted from consuming moderate amounts of beer, he disagreed with one committee

member's suggestion that intellectual work also required alcohol and stated that in his opinion moderate consumption harmed the nervous systems and brains of the higher classes.¹⁸ Like the 1890 enquiry, the line of questioning often veered from impartiality and exposed the concerns of committee members as alcohol consumers. It is reasonable to assume that most committee members drank alcohol for various reasons—either to relax and socialise, for health reasons or to combat fatigue and 'stimulate' intellectual output. It is also likely that aside from the fervent pro-temperance supporters, many witnesses were regular drinkers and their opinions on their own drinking habits and those of others were coloured by their experiences as alcohol consumers. In this sense, professionalism and impartiality often gave way to the personal opinions and anecdotal evidence of alcohol consumers.

NOTES

1. Burns E. 1995. *Bad Whisky*: Glasgow: Balvag Books: p. 10.
2. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers (HCPP). c. 171: First Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Intemperance: Evidence of Joseph Chamberlain.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. HCPP. c. 171: First Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Intemperance: Evidence of Joseph Chamberlain.
6. Burns: p. 13.
7. *Ibid.*: p. 32.
8. HCPP. c. 316: First Report of the Select Committee on British and Foreign Spirits: Evidence of Dr Bell.
9. Patent still spirit was often imported from abroad and the name 'German spirit' was applied to any imported spirit although most were imported from Russia.
10. HCPP. c. 316: First Report of the Select Committee on British and Foreign Spirits: Evidence of Dr Bell.
11. *Ibid.*
12. HCPP. c. 316: First Report of the Select Committee on British and Foreign Spirits: Evidence of Dr Bell.
13. HCPP. c. 316: First Report of the Select Committee on British and Foreign Spirits: Evidence of Mr Cobden Samuel.
14. HCPP. c. 316: First Report of the Select Committee on British and Foreign Spirits: Evidence of Mr Cobden Samuel.

15. HCPP. c. 418: Third report of the Select Committee on Intemperance: Evidence of Thomas Lauder Brunton.
16. Ibid.
17. HCPP. c. 418: Third report of the Select Committee on Intemperance: Evidence of Sir William Gull.
18. Ibid.

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