George Cruikshank and his Bottle

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A suitable subject for a tribute to my friend/colleague/advisor Doutor Hélio Alves was not difficult to find. His interest in eighteenth/nineteenth-century caricature, along with his knowledge of nineteenth-century drink abuse/reform made George Cruikshank an obvious choice. Yet I am only able to write this paper because of the opportunities, help and encouragement I received over the years from Doutor Hélio himself. For that I express here my profound gratitude. I am sure he would not have endorsed the radical anti-drink stand taken by Cruikshank in his later years. Nevertheless, I feel sure that he would have applauded the fact that Cruikshank promoted his teetotal convictions, however unpopular and no matter the cost to himself, in the belief that he was helping people to improve themselves. This was a quality he so admired in the political radicals he devoted so much of his own time to studying.

George Cruikshank (1792-1878) had a love-hate relationship with alcohol. He held these emotions consecutively, however, not simultaneously. This paper will focus on two remarkable, but very different, works of art produced during his anti-drink period, or rather roughly the last thirty years of his life. They are his eight-part glyphograph series *The Bottle* (1847) and his gigantic oil painting *Worship of Bacchus* (1860-2).[1]

George Cruikshank made over 15,000 drawings in his lifetime.[2] His early, biting caricatures, especially those produced for William Hone's cutting-edge political satire, along with his later whimsical, comic sketches

[1] An etching and engraving of *Worship of Bacchus* was produced in 1863.

[2] 'Drawings' is used here as an all-embracing term. In fact, he produced sketches, etchings, portraits, wood-engravings, caricatures, watercolours and oil paintings for portraits, magazines, books, toys, song sheets, broadsheets, and pamphlets.

in *Life in London* (1821), his illustrations for the first English edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (1827), and those completed for Charles Dickens' *Sketches by Boz* (1836 & 1837) and *Oliver Twist* (1837-8), plus illustrations for seven Harrison Ainsworth novels, are probably Cruikshank's best known and most highly regarded pieces of work. There is no denying that the quality is generally much higher than that of his later temperance efforts. This, along with a general misunderstanding of, or even aversion to, his crusading temperance propaganda (for propaganda it was), is probably the reason contemporaries accorded it a secondary status.[3]

From 1849, George Cruikshank was a teetotaller, which means he believed nothing but total abstinence from alcoholic liquor would ensure safety from drink addiction and ultimate ruin. He believed that moderate drinking was no guarantee against future alcoholism. At the time *The Bottle* was conceived, Cruikshank was not an abstainer, however. Indeed, he had a reputation as an abuser of strong drink. This was deservedly acquired from his youth, when he frequently spent time in the drinking places of London and often ended private dinners with a display of drunken theatricals.[4] His father was a heavy drinker, and his death, supposedly after winning a bet to see who could down the most whiskeys (Patten, *A Revaluation*, 225) greatly affected George, as did witnessing his elder brother Isaac Robert's slow decline through drink abuse. By 1847, George had unsuccessfully tried to stop his own drinking various times.[5]

The Bottle

The Bottle was not Cruikshank's first anti-drink work. He had produced 'The Gin Shop' which appeared in *Scraps and Sketches,* 2nd series, 1829; 'The Pillars of a Gin Shop', in *My Sketch Book,* 1833; and 'The Gin Juggarnaut', in *My Sketch Book,* 1835. These were all allegories which told a tale in one plate, however. In 1847, Cruikshank followed in William Hogarth's footsteps, producing a moral narrative in eight separate scenes, called *The Bottle*.[6] It tells of the ruin of a prosperous working-class family through drink abuse, and points out the dangers of moderate drinking. It was a small part of the vast array of self-help literature with which the Victorian public was bombarded.

In 1847, Cruikshank's career was at a low ebb and *The Bottle* was an attempt to earn money as well as to impart a message. He deliberately avoided using expensive copper plates for the etching, preferring the cheaper glyphograph method, so that a wider public could be reached. This meant a rougher finished product, but Cruikshank was willing to forfeit technique in order to reach the working class. Although the end result was flat and lifeless, the public response to it was amazing, with reportedly 100,000 being sold in the first few days at a shilling a set. Superior quality editions were also available at 6s and 2s 6d. Eight stage versions of the drama were performed, and there was a waxworks representation, poems, illustrated lectures, sermons and other ephemera. Cruikshank forsook his copyright, uncharacteristically, which enabled a prolific number of imitations to be produced in print.[7]

Success was further guaranteed with the backing of the temperance world. Magic lantern shows of *The Bottle* attracted large audiences and many a slide was used to illustrate a temperance lecture or provide instructive entertainment at a Band of Hope function. Cruikshank showed the plates to the chairman of The National Temperance Society, William Cash, who liked the work but was perplexed by the fact that the artist could draw the effects of strong drink so vividly and yet still drank himself. Cruikshank reflected on Cash's words, and became a campaigning teetotaller not long afterwards.[8] It was as if the enormous success the plates achieved had given him a quasi-religious conversion experience. He was proclaimed by the

[3] For example, Ruskin declared '[Temperance] has warped the entire currents of his thoughts and life' (quoted in Patten, *A Revaluation*, 253).

[4] A famous 1833 drawing of Cruikshank by Daniel Maclise has him seated on a barrel in a pothouse, pipe in hand and tankard by his side. Cruikshank did not like the image.

[5] Burns pinpoints the reason for his failure: 'Social custom had hitherto proved too strong for perseverance in well-doing' (Burns, 149).

[6] See Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress* (1735) and *Industry and Idleness* (1747) for comparison.

[7] All the plays were in minor theatres, some in Ginshop Saloons or Tavern Theatres. Charles Mackay composed a poem which begins: 'Weep, children, weep! Be tears of anguish shed [...].' Matthew Arnold also wrote a sonnet after being moved by the prints (Patten, *George Cruikshank vol. II*, 246).

[8] Biographers automatically assume that this means he signed the teetotal pledge, when in fact he declared 'I am pledged to the Almighty on the faith and honour of a gentleman' and did not sign on principle (Whittaker, 233). This alters nothing regarding his enthusiasm and commitment to the cause.

staunch teetotaller Thomas Whittaker, as '[a] valuable trophy to our cause. [...] a constant figure in our movement and a welcome light at our meetings for many years' (Whittaker, 232).

Unfortunately for Cruikshank, the enormous popularity of his *Bottle* series did not signify financial gain. Plagiarists in Britain and abroad produced their own versions of the moral tale. Moreover, the more expensive editions, designed for the upper end of the market, did not sell as well as the cheaper counterparts. The appeal was most definitely to the lower-middle and the working-class in general. Although they bought copies in their thousands, the low price meant great financial profit was unlikely. Even the popular sequel, *The Drunkard's Children,* produced in 1848, was not enough to stave off temporary bankruptcy.

The plates will now be described in detail. All except the fourth and the eighth are set in the dining/sitting room of an upper working-class home. This gives continuity and allows the observer to easily detect the progressive degradation that the family experiences.

Plate one:[9] a happy family of parents and three children enjoy a meal. Numerous markers of prosperity are discernible, from the grandfather clock by the door to the blazing fire in the grate. Ornaments abound, as do flowers and furnishings. The caption reads: 'The Bottle is brought out for the first time. The husband induces his wife "just to take a drop"' (Moderate drinkers were known as 'little drop' men precisely because they believed such a small quantity could not be harmful).

Plate two: a dramatic change has occurred. The husband now slumps by a cold hearth, hands-in-pockets, badly dressed, oblivious to the pleading stares of his two youngest, hungry children. The cat licks the empty plate while the mother sends her eldest out to get drink via the pawnbroker's. It is evident from the stark faces, bare cupboard and general disarray that things are not going well. The caption reads: 'He is discharged from his employment for drunkenness: They pawn their clothes to supply the bottle'.

Plate three: the family is losing its possessions, but husband and wife carry on drinking. The wife casts a glance at the bailiffs, but her face has become transformed by drink and she is incapable of reacting. Only the eldest girl appears as in plate one, although her expression has changed

[9] See Appendix A.

from contentment to anxiety. The clock on the mantelpiece, proud symbol of working-class prosperity, is now broken. Ornaments have been replaced by a tankard. The family remains self-contained, however, cut off from the outside world, wallowing in their own self-made misery. The caption reads: 'An execution sweeps off the greater part of their furniture: they comfort themselves with the bottle'.

Plate four: the scene is now the street. The boy begs from a passing woman. His state of dress contrasts starkly with the two children who look on. Meanwhile, the wife, baby and elder girl, shoeless, await the father as he leaves the tavern, bottle in pocket. The girl turns towards the boy, away from the gin shop, but the wife looks forlornly at her husband, caught in the grip of drink. The caption reads: 'Unable to obtain employment, they are driven by poverty into the streets to beg, and by this means they still supply the bottle'.

Plate five:[10] the table now bears the coffin of the youngest child, her life forfeit to drink. The room is greatly denuded of furniture. The mother and the girl have strength enough to weep but the boy stares hopelessly into the pathetic fire. The man stands, haggard, hatless, clutching his bottle. His face has a quasi-manic look on it, for he is beginning to lose his reason. The clock has disappeared from the mantelpiece. The caption reads: 'Cold, misery and want, destroy their youngest child: they console themselves with the bottle'.

Plate six: things worsen as violence takes over. The husband attacks his wife while the children attempt her defence. For the first time an outsider enters their world, alarmed at the noise. Her horror mirrors the reaction expected from the observer. The room is now almost totally devoid of furniture, and what there is, is upside down, just like their lives. The caption reads: 'Fearful quarrels and brutal violence are the natural consequences of the frequent use of the bottle'.

Plate seven: the wife lies dead. The police arrest the husband who is beside himself with horror and incomprehension. The girl cries, comforted by an officer of the law. The neighbours now invade the room, but it is too late. They cannot help. Apart, in the bottom right-hand corner, the boy stands alone, pathetic in his misery. The bottle lies smashed on the floor.

[10] See Appendix A.

The caption reads: 'The husband, in a state of furious drunkenness, kills his wife with the instrument of all their misery'.

Plate eight: the degradation is complete. The children have taken on the role of prostitute and pimp, and visit their father in the madhouse. He sits in the corner, arms folded, trembling, having no money to purchase drink. The observer is once more in the confines of a room but the circumstances are far different to those of the first plate. The caption reads: 'The bottle has done its work. It has destroyed the infant and the mother. It has brought the son and the daughter to vice and to the streets, and has left the father a hopeless maniac'.

Not all contemporaries agreed with Cruikshank's reasoning, that drink caused poverty and misery and not *vice versa*. Charles Dickens, for example, appreciated the moral tale but was unhappy about the causes. He thought it 'should have begun in sorrow, or poverty or ignorance – the three things in which, in its awful aspect, it *does* begin' (Patten, *A Revaluation,* 249). He denied, therefore, that drinking customs or social drinking could produce the evils Cruikshank so starkly portrayed. He was also blind to the problems of alcoholism in respectable society. Cruikshank's temperance work was one of the reasons for the later break-up of their personal friendship.

In 1879, William Bates described *The Bottle* as 'somewhat unsatisfactory, whether as a work of art, or as a moral lesson' (Patten, *A Revaluation,* 165). In 1992, William Feaver thought the series 'an artless, captioned, all purpose morality play', and indeed it is. It would never be popular to an audience of the twenty-first century, for more subtlety would be required. However, *The Bottle* touched a nerve that caught the Victorian popular imagination, spawning 'Bottlemania', a merchandising heaven. Earthenware services were decorated with *Bottle* designs, walls were placarded and windows decorated with them. It appeared at the right time, when the public had been awakened to the problem of over-drinking by the temperance campaigners. *The Bottle* entertained audiences who saw it performed at the theatre or in slide shows. Whether it actually converted anyone to teetotalism is difficult to say. It must have induced a number of people to at least try to stop drinking. Drunkenness was increasingly socially unacceptable – and recognised as dangerous. *The Bottle,* along with its 1848 sequel *The Drunkard's Children,* at least revived Cruikshank's flagging professional reputation and put his name on the lips of thousands of people once again.

Worship of Bacchus[11]

Cruikshank was following a familiar early nineteenth-century trend when he painted his gigantic *Worship of Bacchus.* In 1820, Haydon had enjoyed a rare success with *Christ's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem,* for example, and panoramas and dioramas, both staged and painted, had attracted crowds to the Surrey Gardens as late as the 1850s. Although large canvasses were increasingly less popular by 1860, a few artists still enjoyed success with them. In 1862, eighty thousand people paid 1s each to see Frith's *Railway Station* in a gallery next to the Haymarket Theatre (Patten, *George Cruikshank vol. II,* 402).

Cruikshank's oil painting measures 7 feet 8 inches high by 13 feet 4 inches wide (2.36m by 4.06m). The artist described his picture as 'a mapping out of certain ideas for an especial purpose' (Patten, *George Cruikshank vol. II,* 409-10).[12] His didactic intention was plain. By dramatising the terrible dangers of drinking he wished to stop people doing so. He believed that the shock treatment would work. Richard Dorment, in his review article of the Tate Britain exhibition of the restored painting, 2001 (see page 11), calls the painting a 'diatribe against drink. [...] A delirious vision of hell on earth' (Dorment, www.theartnewspaper.com).

The canvas is crowded with one thousand figures arranged into numerous vignettes, all in varying stages of drunkenness. It is divided into horizontal lines, intersected at the mid-point by a vertical element constituted by a giant statue of the wine god, raised cup-in-hand. Those in the foreground, at the bottom, are engaged in seemingly innocuous celebrations or rituals (a baptism, a wedding, a wake, a dinner party, etc.), while those at the top, in the background, in larger numbers, are in the final stages of alcoholism. The eye travels automatically from bottom to top, passing over scenes such as a sailor being flogged for letting his ship catch fire, to a runaway train on the very edge of the painting, on the right, its intending damage left to the viewer's imagination. Scenes of violence – muggings, beatings, robbery, murder – are flanked by scenes of conviviality – singers, a harlequin, clubs of Freemasons and Odd Fellows. A police

[11] See Appendix B.

[12] For details of the long production process from inception to finished product see Patten, *George Cruikshank vol. II,* 402-20.

station, reformatory, ragged school, house of correction, two hospitals, a cemetery, a workhouse, jail and a lunatic asylum are all placed at the top of the picture, showing the inevitable end for drinkers. The gallows is not forgotten. The sky is fouled by smoke from the chimneys of breweries and distilleries.

As with *The Bottle,* the picture lacks subtlety for Cruikshank has posted moral signs in various places: 'Horrid abyss of Ruin and disgrace into which Clergymen fall who sacrifice themselves at the Shrine of Bacchus'; 'Sacrificed at the shrine of Bacchus, father, mother, sisters, brothers, wife, children, property, friends, body and mind'. All sections of nineteenth-century British society are represented, as well as British colonialists foisting alcohol on previously teetotal cultures. On the left, established clergy offer drink to a Muslim, while on the right Dissenting clergy offer it to a Hindu. Both refuse. This is an interesting comment on British imperial behaviour. The temperance propagandists' denunciation of the drunken behaviour of British troops in India and elsewhere was incessant in the 1860s.[13]

George Cruikshank painted *Worship of Bacchus* on his own initiative. It was not commissioned. The time and effort he put into the work over a two year period prove he believed in its intrinsic value, both as a money-winner as well as a propaganda tool for the temperance cause. This belief was largely misplaced, however, for the painting never made much money even though it had a sponsoring committee of temperance people promoting it. After a vigorous subscription effort that raised several thousand pounds, most of which went to pay off the debts Cruikshank incurred while painting the picture, the canvas still returned very little financial reward to its creator.

The oil painting was first exhibited to the public in August 1862. The venue was a small rented gallery next to the Lyceum Theatre, London. Despite previous assurances from supporters, and what proved to be false hopes raised by the favourable opinions received after the exhibition of the preliminary watercolour version in 1860, the expected public did not materialise except in very small numbers.

Not even a move to Exeter Hall, a favourite venue for temperance occasions, encouraged the public, general or temperance, to enter.

[13] Temperance societies were set up in various regiments stationed abroad in an attempt to counter the debilitating effect of excessive drinking in the military.

Cruikshank's first biographer, Blanchard Jerrold, described the scene in the exhibition room of Exeter Hall on one particular day.

> It was empty. There was a wild, anxious look on his face when he greeted me. While we talked, he glanced once or twice at the door, when we heard any sound in that direction. Were they coming at last, the tardy, laggard public for whom he had been bravely toiling for so many years? Here was his last mighty labour against the wall, and all the world had been told that it was there. [...] A great committee of creditable men had combined to usher it with pomp into the world. All who loved and honoured and admired him had spoken words of encouragement. Yet it was near noon, and only a solitary visitor had wandered into the room. (Patten, *George Cruikshank vol. II,* 413)

The painting was accompanied in Exeter Hall by a retrospective exhibition of Cruikshank's work; eleven hundred sketches, studies, water-colours, etchings, etc. This provided an opportunity for his much-acclaimed earlier caricatures and book illustrations to be examined by a new generation. However, not even the praise afforded by some critics could alter the public's lukewarm reaction. The acclaim of some was counterbalanced by the derision of others. William Michael Rosseti called Cruikshank 'a master craftsman' but thought *Bacchus* 'Not a good picture, and can scarcely, we think, be considered a good total-abstinence lecture'. On the other hand, William Makepeace Thackeray was enthusiastic about it (Patten, *George Cruikshank vol. II,* 414).

Despite disappointing attendances both in London and the provinces, temperance advocates maintained the idea that the giant oil canvas had changed the hearts and minds of the nation. The temperance historian Dawson Burns wrote proudly that after being seen by many thousands of people in various parts of Britain, 'it became the property of the nation' in 1869 (Burns, 150). The nation was not grateful. Despite having been presented to the National Gallery, it was quickly transferred to the store room of the South Kensington (now Victoria and Albert) Museum, where it slowly deteriorated. It was not until May 2001 that the public really saw the picture again. It was put on exhibition, restored to its full glory, in the Tate Britain between May and December of that year. A BBC documentary (broadcast 2 June on BBC 2), presented by art critic Andrew Graham-Dixon, entitled *1,000 Ways of Getting Drunk in England,* examined the picture and its relation to drinking culture. The Tate initiative was part of

its in-focus displays which place individual works of art in their social, historical and aesthetic contexts. The aim is to examine the ways in which art has helped to mirror and shape ideas of national identity. Tate Britain's publicity described *Worship of Bacchus* as 'one of the most original, ambitious and didactic works in the history of British art' (Indepth Arts News). Great praise indeed. Just over one hundred and thirty years were required before the painting's originality and ambitious purpose were recognised.

We can learn a lot about Cruikshank and his times from this painting, and would be poorer for not having saved it. Recent Home Office reports show a similar relationship today between drink, crime and social erosion as that observed by Cruikshank, making *Worship of Bacchus* relevant to a twenty-first-century audience.

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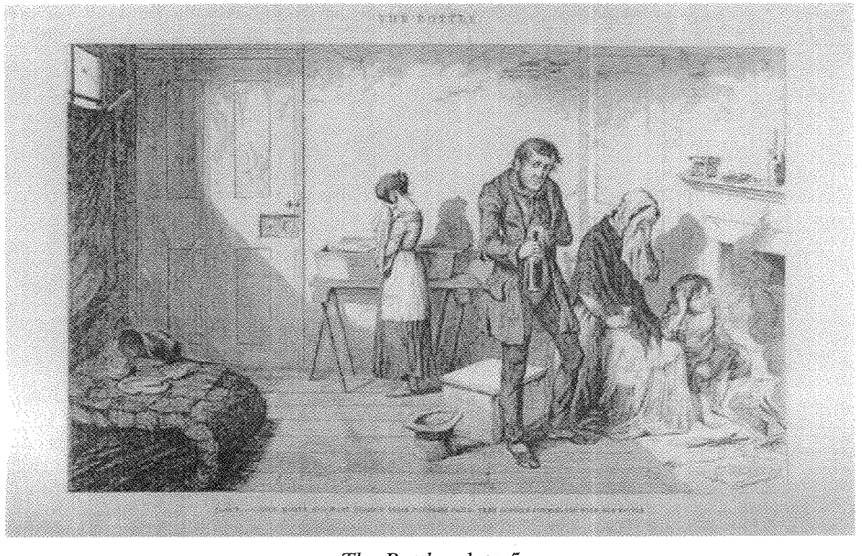
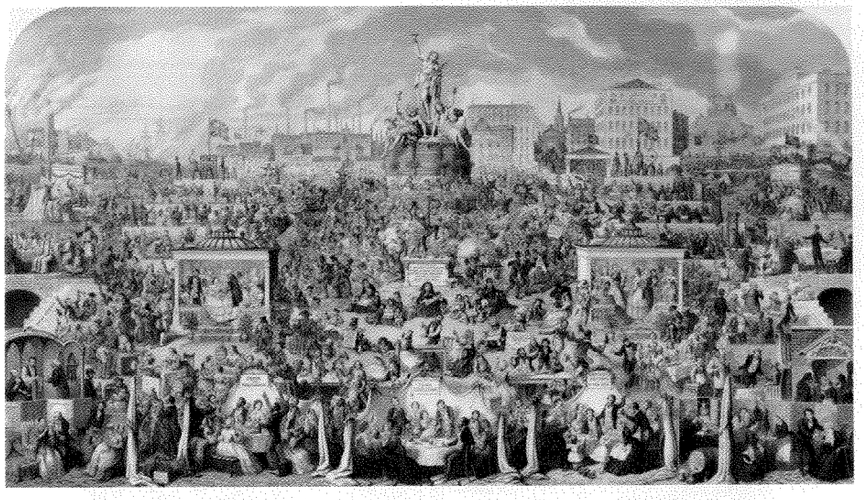
Appendix A

The Bottle, plate 1



The Bottle, plate 5

The Bottle plates 1 and 5;
http://www.bugpowder.com/andy/e.cruikshank_the.bottle.html



The Worship of Bacchus; http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/jgoodliffe/bacchus/