

The War, the Birth Rate, and Strong Drink



UNDER THE INFLUENCE. Wife: Good gracious! what do you mean by coming home drunk in broad daylight? Smith: 'Sorrigh, dear. People shay I'm influench by prohibition party, an I just been showing 'em I shupport prohibition of my own accord. (*Observer*, 13 June 1914).

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/27579402>

“The deciding factor which determines the fate of every nation in peace or war is—what will be the numbers of the next generation and who will be their parents?”

A writer in the New York “Independent” states that in twenty years from now the most serious effects of the war will become apparent. Why is France groaning now under the weight of invasion?—not because she was defeated in 1870, but because she allowed her coffins to outnumber her cradles. The French people of today and of yesterday have sacrificed posterity for luxury and ease and the love of pleasure. They are learning now that it is sacrifice and not indulgence that is the strength of a nation. Since the year 1881 France has lost a battle a month, as the result of race suicide, and the invasion of her soil began seriously from that period, for foreigners flowed in to fill the vacant places. France was sure of defeat if peace had continued, but providentially she has been given another chance of survival if she will only take heed. It is more honourable for a woman to bear children than for a man to bear arms, and when the function of women is exalted in a nation, and morality is exalted there is less risk of war, and if war should arise, every hope of its being carried to a successful issue.

France has been the great sinner in limiting the birthrate, but even our own little country has transgressed in a less degree. The *summum bonum* of many women here has been ease and amusement, and the offenders are those women who belong to the most prosperous classes of society. The wives of professional men do not, we believe, have a family, on the average, of more than two or three children. The birth-rate in New Zealand per 1,000 of population in 1882–86 was 35.4; in 1899 it had dropped to 25, and in 1913 had risen only to 26. The price of this state of affairs to be paid by New Zealand is that we are not able to send as many recruits to the war as we ought to have been able to send, and the wealth of this country is less than it ought to be. In 1878 one in every three of the married women of childbearing age in New Zealand gave birth to a child, while in 1911 the rate was only one in nearly five.

Germany has not perpetrated these national crimes. The Germans had not until recently adopted a policy of race-suicide, nor did they make pleasure the great goal of life, but they offended even far more seriously in the sins of the spirit, pride, greed, envy, self-sufficiency, and unbelief in matters that are supreme and eternal.

The decline in the birth-rate of the British Isles is also deplorable, but the greatest curse of England is the appalling lust for strong drink. It is almost impossible to exaggerate this factor in the production of insanity, crime, poverty, misery; disease, and national inefficiency. We have all read reports from statesmen, soldiers of high standing, and the Admiralty of the effect of drink in lessening the supply of munitions and warships for the prosecution of this great war that is being fought for freedom. Everyone who has lived in the great cities at Home has observed the ravages of the drink fiend, and here in New Zealand we see the same destruction in less degree.

*Oh, God of justice! God of right!
Why is the world so full of woe?
Why are souls withered by this blight?
Is this the working of Thy foe—
The rebel sire of sin and crime,
Who makes Thy likeness, man, his thrall?
Oh, Father! Shield our new-born clime
From this, the vilest fiend of all.*

Bracken, who wrote these lines, was neither a Puritan nor a Prohibitionist. We do not believe that the natural appetite for stimulants is wrong, or that facilities for gratifying it can be entirely abolished, but we do believe that sharp measures for restricting the lust for alcohol in the British race should be attempted, if only for the sake of efficiency in war. If these measures fail, we shall welcome an attempt at prohibition, for it is better that the moderate man should go without than that in a time of stress the immoderate should materially lessen the stability of the army, the navy, and the nation. Mr. Lloyd George, although we disagree with him on many points, in this matter of the drink curse has earned the thanks of the nation. He has attempted to lessen the facilities for drunkenness, and to provide beverages less loaded with alcohol than those which gratify the drunkard's palate. He has had vested interests against him. The Irish Nationalists, who help to keep him in office, backed by Irish publicans and distillers, have warned him to take his sacrilegious hands off the Ark of the Covenant, which is, in this instance, the whisky cask. It is better for the nation to suffer than that the profits of the trade should dwindle, or that the brewers should alter the quality of their output! The House of Lords contains dozens of peers directly and financially interested in the liquor trade. The Bench of Bishops, so far as we know, has not seriously attempted to lessen the facilities for drunkenness. It is time for the medical profession to give its support to the cause of temperance; and we recognise that we cannot stop drinking but we can lessen drunkenness by condemning the most ardent liquors, and checking facilities for the sale of drink, and generally lessening temptation. In other words, let us not lead moral weaklings into temptation but deliver them from evil.

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