

**Is alcohol safe as a medicine? : a critique on a review by W.B. Carpenter, M.D., entitled "Bitter beer, pale ale, Indian pale ale, and their puffers," in the "Scottish review" / by Epsilon.**

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**Publication/Creation**

London : William Tweedie, 1853.

**Persistent URL**

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SECOND THOUSAND.

IS ALCOHOL SAFE  
AS A MEDICINE?

A CRITIQUE ON A REVIEW

BY

W. B. CARPENTER, M.D.,

ENTITLED

“BITTER BEER, PALE ALE, INDIAN PALE ALE, AND  
THEIR PUFFERS,”

IN THE

“SCOTTISH REVIEW.”

BY EPSILON.

“Spirituous liquors destroy more lives than the sword; war has its intervals of destruction, but spirits operate at all times and seasons upon human life.”—Dr. Trotter.

LONDON:  
WILLIAM TWEEDIE, 337, STRAND.

1853.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

“Are stimulants—by which I mean ardent spirits, wines, and strong ales—are stimulants necessary? Are they pernicious? or are they neither the one nor the other? I assert that they are, in every instance, as articles of diet, pernicious; and even as medicines, unnecessary; since we possess drugs which will answer the same intentions, in, at least, an equal degree.”—Dr. E. JOHNSON, author of “Life, Health, and Disease.”

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## A CRITIQUE, &c.

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“BETTER is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof” is a very old proverb—hoary with age, and venerable from antiquity—but grievously outraged in the first article of the new *Scottish Quarterly*. Eminently sound and logical, for the most part, at the offset, the writer is strikingly unsound and illogical at the close—and not only labours to *undo* much of his own work, but actually *assists* those he is attacking. He erects a castle, and then rashly disturbs the ground about it—and resembles a child playing at ninepins, who sets them up to knock a large proportion of them down again. The health-question is, too frequently, the Pons Asinorum of would-be, and the Scape goat of quondam Abstainers. Like tyros, who easily master the previous propositions of Euclid, and stumble at the 5th, there are many who can see the simplicity, the economy, the humanity, and the morality of Total Abstinence, but find it difficult to solve the *sanitary* problem; whilst there are others, who, not having looked well to their foundations before they began to build, find their superstructures begin to totter in the earliest storms. If, in either of these dilemmas, they have recourse to those who *should* perform the part of guides, the haze obscuring their intellectual vision is generally not only *not dispelled*, but, on the contrary, rendered still more dense. Were it otherwise, there are probably not a few of the disciples of Æsculapius, who would speedily find themselves in a position approximating to that of Othello. To say that the ranks of the Temperance Reformers are *decimated* through misapprehension or ignorance, would probably be little more than a figure of speech—and wherever this conviction prevails, it should nerve the hand, and loosen the tongue, of all who possess the one, or can use the other.

Vexed to find the powerful ratiocination, for the most part, of the preceding, so lamentably belied in the concluding paragraphs, of Dr. Carpenter's Essay, I have ventured to moisten my pen, not only



to enter a decided protest against the loud and absolute *Io Pæans* with which the paper has been welcomed by a periodical in the West of England, devoted to the Total Abstinence cause—but also to endeavour to manifest the inconsistency of the end with the beginning, chiefly by the aid of such weapons as are to be found in the armoury of the Reviewer. Nor do I take exception to the battleground in which he himself delights,—believing that whether in the Plains of India or the Forests of Siberia—in any Country and every Zone—the same principles will apply with greater or lesser force.

As some of the readers of these lines may not have had an opportunity of perusing the article in question, it may not be amiss very succinctly to introduce to their notice some of its leading characteristics. It purports, then, to be a Review (covering 24 pages) of a Tract of 8 pages length, on the Dietetic Use of Certain Liquids, by a London Citizen. Discarding any attempt “to raise the ghost of Strychnine,” the Reviewer intimates his intention of examining into the merits of the assertions which have been made, “that the bitter beers constitute a beverage which the healthful man may use with benefit for the preservation of the tone and vigour of his stomach, and which the debilitated invalid will find most advantageous in bringing back that organ to the due performance of its duty”\*—and especially of directing his “inquiry to the bold claim advanced by Messrs. Allsopp, on the authority (as their hired scribe alleges) of numerous experienced practitioners,”—some of the most distinguished of these having previously given their sanction to the positive affirmation ‘that total and universal abstinence from alcoholic beverages, *of all sorts*, would greatly contribute to the *health*, \* \* \* \* of the human race’—“of having ‘been the means of saving more lives, in the scorching heats of the Indian latitudes, than three-fourths of the elaborate appurtenances of the Pharmacopœia;’ inasmuch as it is pretty evident, that if the bitter beers can *save* life in India, they must tend to *preserve* it in this country”—whilst, “if, on the other hand, it should prove, \* \* \* \* that they help, like all other alcoholic beverages, to *increase the mortality* of Europeans in India, it is pretty evident that they cannot be really salutary, or even innocent articles for home consumption.”† Passing by the charges which Dr. Carpenter prefers against the conductors of the *Lancet*,

\* Vide pp. 1, 2.

+ Vide p. 2.



including his slur upon its analytical sanitary commissioner, I find that he considers the only points with which he has to deal, are, "the small quantity of *alcohol*, and the large quantity of *aromatic anodyne bitters*"\* contained in the bitter beers. Now let the reader, *en passant*, mark particularly this passage, as it is one of those to which I shall have to revert. (Point No. 1.)

The Reviewer then proceeds to show, that *alcohol* is valueless as a solvent,—incapable of supplying anything which is essential for the nutrition of the body,—and that its alimentary value consists merely in its power of contributing to the production of heat—though, for this purpose, inferior to *fat*—whilst its physiological action upon the living body is essentially that of a *stimulus*, increasing for a time its vital activity, or of certain parts of it, so that a greater effect may be produced in a given time under its use than can be obtained without it; this increased activity being, however, followed by a proportional depression, so that nothing is gained in the end.

After an interesting allusion to the terrible experience of a large proportion of the population of Sweden, amongst whom potatoe-brandy has come to be employed as the regular beverage—the result of which has been, according to Professor Huss, a gradual deterioration in the condition of the peasantry, both physically, morally, and socially; together with the development of a peculiar disease to which Dr. Huss has given the name of *Alcoholismus Chronicus*, or, the chronic alcohol disease,—with a notice of an individual case of great interest, and some convincing canine experiments; and a citation from a recent work by this distinguished physician, to the effect that the returns from the militia enlistments prove the youth of Sweden to be rapidly degenerating both in height and vigour, the number of exceptions for being under the standard and for general debility having greatly increased during the last *ten years*; and that the increase of crime, suicide, and insanity, is also too decided to admit of any doubt as to its connexion with the increasing intemperance of the people,—Dr. Carpenter triumphantly asks, "What candid man, with such facts as these before him, can refuse to admit that alcohol is a *poison*, not the less certain and virulent because its evil effects do not immediately develop themselves?" (Point No. 2.)

\* Vide p. 3.



The Essayist next proceeds—after a defiance and a challenge to the admirers of alcoholic beverages—to develop his views on the connexion between the habitual “moderate” use of alcoholic liquors and what are termed Zymotic diseases—such as Cholera, the various kinds of Fever, epidemic Dysentery, Diarrhœa, etc. The theory of the Reviewer is probably based on the discoveries of Dr. Prout and others—and the *gist* of it may be stated in very few words. It is this—that the only provision in the system by which the blood can be freed from the presence of alcohol, being by the act of *expiration*, the free and constant separation of the effete or exhausted matters from the circulating current is thereby interfered with, and the system is consequently rendered peculiarly liable to disease.\* In support of this theory he draws effectively on a gentleman whose researches have already distinguished his name—Lieut. Col. Sykes—and fully establishes the position that in a tropical climate entire abstinence from alcoholic beverages is far the safer course. He asserts in unqualified terms that “the health and longevity of the European residents in India have improved, in the precise proportion in which they have given up the use of alcoholic beverages, or substituted the weaker for the stronger.”† Referring to the Madras division of the European army in India, it appears that the number of deaths “among 450 total abstainers during the year 1849 was 5, or 11.1 per 1000; whilst the number among 4318 temperate men (consumers of malt liquors *in moderation*) was 100, or 23.1 per 1000, being rather more than *double* the previous proportion.”‡ It may be added that the foregoing is the *general* experience of the European army in the Madras Presidency; but he next follows the course of a particular regiment—the 84th—noted for containing a large proportion of total abstainers (among them the Colonel and nearly the whole of the Officers), and for the extreme sobriety of the remainder of the men, and conclusively proves by its experience under three different conditions, viz., in a healthy station, in an unhealthy station, and on a march, the com-

\* There can be no doubt that after the imbibition of alcohol, *the separation of carbon from the venous blood is impeded*; and perhaps I need hardly say that carbonic acid is a *virulent poison*. Its deleterious nature is the *cause* of death by drowning and strangulation, and neither the water nor the rope—these only prevent the *separation* of the carbon, which increases in the blood, until it reaches the point of suffocation. Persons in a state of inebriety are extremely liable to, and sometimes experience, this death, from the great quantity of carbon retained in the blood.

† Vide p. 14.

‡ Vide p. 16.



parative immunity from illness and loss. Very striking indeed is the contrast between the results of the two systems afforded by the marches (in opposite directions) of this regiment, and the 63rd, for a distance of between four and five hundred miles, *through the same country and at the very same time*. In the former there was a freedom from sickness absolutely unprecedented in Indian marches; whilst the latter suffered so *severely*, that when the two regiments met on the road, it had to borrow all the spare dhoolies (sick palanquins) of the other, for the conveyance of the sick.

“And now, Messrs. Allsopp,” continues the Reviewer, “with these cogent testimonials to the superiority of the total abstinence system under the greatest trials to which the human constitution can be subject, fully bearing out our theoretical conclusion, we repeat our assertion that, as a substitute for *water*, your pale ale can do nothing but *mischief* to the European resident in India, save in those exceptional cases in which it answers a medicinal purpose; and that the assertion of its beneficial action can only be sustained by a comparison of its results with those of *more pernicious* agents. As an old unbranded wine is *not so bad* as a new and fiery spirit, so the pale ale, with its far smaller proportion of alcohol, is better than either. But this does not prove it to be a more wholesome beverage than water; and, indeed, the obvious inference is in just the contrary direction, namely, that *the less alcohol* there is in an habitual beverage, *the more wholesome* it becomes.”\*

Dr. C. then proceeds to widen the issue—“if we have been consistent in our deductions, and our data have been correct, it necessarily follows, that a practice which is pernicious in India must be pernicious in this country, though its results may not develop themselves so directly and ostensibly, and that a large amount of the existing liability to disease may be traced to the accumulation of the ‘waste’ or effete matter of the system, in the circulating current, in consequence of the obstacle which the habitual introduction of alcohol, even in small quantities, interposes to its due elimination.”† He adds that the remote effects of the habitual use of “moderate” quantities of alcohol may be also traced in a disorder of general nutrition, which is the direct source of numerous diseases which he

\* Vide p. 19.

+ Idem.



mentions,—the development of all of which is, at any rate, aided, by its moderate use. He proceeds—“It is obvious, then, that if Messrs. Allsopp would supply a *really wholesome* beverage, either for the Indian market, or for home consumption, they must not only *refrain from strychnine*, but must also *omit the alcohol*.”\* (Point No. 3.)

On the remaining point, as to the “aromatic and anodyne bitter” of the Bitter Beer, he spends very few words—rather cavalierly ridiculing the stomachic virtues of the Hop,—acknowledging to having *heard* of hop tea, but confessing to never having seen or tasted it.

He then addresses himself to the question of the local action on the stomach, of Bitter Beer; and affirms “that the deterioration, not the maintenance, of the digestive power of that organ, is what all sound reasoning would lead us to expect as the ultimate consequence of its habitual employment by a *healthy* subject.”† If *assistance* is lent to a healthy organ—whether the spine, or the stomach, or any other—it “will gradually lose its own independent vigour, and will come at last to *require* the artificial support without which it could at first have discharged its full share of duty.”‡

Thus far then—with rare exceptions—I can go hand in hand with Dr. Carpenter. But will it be credited by the intelligent reader, that, after such a mass of, mostly, unexceptionable argument, as the first two and twenty pages of the Review afford, the eminent Essayist should lend all the weight of his initials to pass off as current the miserable delusion that there *are* cases in which “a small quantity of the ‘bitter beer’ or ‘pale ale’ taken with the principal meal of the day, does *more good*, with *less harm*, than any medicine that the physician can prescribe”|| notwithstanding, in the previous page only, he has asserted that “all experience teaches that artificial assistance given to the stomach, when its power is depressed by some of the unhealthful influences which we have enumerated, is a temporary gain, at the expense of an ultimate loss; and that if these unhealthful influences continue in action, their effects upon the system being masked (as it were) by the artificial provocative, it is

\* Vide p. 20.

† Vide p. 22.

‡ Idem.

|| Vide p. 23.



gradually undermined, and at last gives way; the process of restoration being tedious and difficult, in proportion to the length of time during which the wrong habit has been pursued."

Now let me re-direct the attention of those who have followed me thus far, to Point No. 1, where Dr. C. does not dissent from the position that the essential elements of bitter beers are "the small quantity of *alcohol*, and the large quantity of *aromatic anodyne bitters*." Then let us advance a step to Point No. 2, and we shall perceive that he virtually admits that the former of these elements is a "*poison*;" which position is fortified by a reference to Point No. 3, where he states its omission to be essential to a *really wholesome* beverage. At last, then, we fairly join issue, and I invite Dr. C. clearly and plainly to show how, if the first of these elements is *poisonous*, and the second *powerless for good*, they (or, in fact, any other alcoholic beverage) can be suited to *any* state of the constitution short of that of a person *in extremis*, when nothing else so efficacious for the mere sustenance of life, during the existence of the crisis, might be readily procurable? \* Especially do I invite him to explain how, if the ultimate consequence of the habitual employment of alcohol by a *healthy* subject, is the *deterioration of the digestive power of the stomach*, † it can be permanently serviceable to those who labour—it may be—under an affection of that very organ, which he admits, (even) in the former case, it is calculated injuriously to affect—and how, if its habitual use in 'moderate' quantities tends to *diminish, or even destroy, the vital properties of the several tissues; to weaken the contractile power of the muscles, and render the heart incapable of efficiently sustaining the circulation; to impair the structure of the kidneys; and by weakening the walls of the blood-vessels, frequently to cause apoplexy and paralysis*, ‡ it can be a beverage more adapted to the use of invalids, than of persons of sound and robust health? If the hale and the hearty are subject to such effects, does not reason lead to the conclusion that the delicate and the sickly must, *a fortiori*, be liable to, at least, similar influences? To my mind, the very fact of its being the nature of alcohol to injure the powers of those who

\* It may be asserted that ammonia in its several preparations—the sesquicarbonate, for instance—is a *better* diffusible stimulant in itself than alcohol,—whilst it is not so injurious to the constitution.

† Vide p. 22.

‡ Vide p. 20.



are *strong*, is an all-potent reason against its prescription for those who are *weak*. When introduced into the human frame, it adds to the friction of its every part, causes irregularity in the action of its main springs—only increasing its rapidity of movement to lessen its ultimate powers—and by injudicious alternations of accelerated and retarded movements, prematurely wears out the beautiful and wonderfully constructed machine,—whilst its influence on the mental faculties is disastrous indeed.\*

Yet most strange to say, in the concluding page or two of his Review, Dr. C. intimates that the cases he refers to occur especially amongst the busy intellectual labourers in the offices and counting-houses of our great towns, who are compelled to continue in circumstances unwholesome to them; and that the other class is that of persons who labour under a permanent deficiency of digestive powers. As regards the former, I will only cite his previous assumption, that *even the moderate consumption of alcoholic liquors powerfully augments the potentiality of insufficient ventilation*,†—and as regards the latter, I will simply reproduce his assertion that *unwholesome drink has a direct tendency to impair the digestive power*.‡

But differing, too, from Dr. C., I believe that if those who now, under medical advice, indulge in Pale Ale or Bitter Beer would entirely abandon their use, and occasionally use instead an infusion of Hops, or that valuable substitute Chamomile tea, they would be far more likely to 'live long in the land' than by acting upon the unsustained views of Dr. Carpenter. Whatever his opinion may be as to the virtue of the hop, it ranks as a good stomachic in weak and irritable states of the stomach; and its use in this country, to impart bitterness to beer, has obtained since the reign of the Eighth Henry. Had Dr. C. thought fit simply to recommend either of the bitters just referred to, as occasional tonics, I could cheerfully have endorsed his prescription; but in my opinion, the alcohol—small though the quantity may be—contained in the pale ales, is likely to far more

\* Dr. Ellis, of the Hanwell Lunatic Asylum, in his evidence before a Parliamentary Committee in the year 1834, stated—"of twenty-eight cases admitted last year, that were reported to us as *recent* cases, *nineteen* out of those *twenty-eight* were drunkards"—amounting to almost *three-fourths*.

† Vide p. 13.

‡ Vide p.p. 22, 23



than counterbalance the good effect of their bitter tonics. I apprehend it is now an admitted fact—indeed he himself virtually admits it—that *solids* alone can *nourish* the body. Whatever is capable of yielding nourishment, must be susceptible of conversion into the solid matter of the body itself. Now, fluids taken into the stomach are not capable of being transmuted into solids. If, then, the alcohol in the bitter beers causes a great acceleration of the circulation of the blood, and a vastly increased action of the heart, without their affording a corresponding degree of nourishment to the system, I maintain that they must be sources of *weakness* rather than of *strength*.\* The great sanitary lesson, with regard to alcoholic beverages, which the masses of this country have to learn, is, that temporary exhilaration is not permanent strength—that present excitement is future weakness.

Light and shade are undoubtedly appropriate to every picture—acting and re-acting upon each other, they enhance the effect of both. But then, the faintest variation of either must harmonize with its deeper development, or the effect cannot be otherwise than painful to the beholder. But there is an ample share of *both* in the production of the Essayist—*e. g.* the sparkling Indian facts, and the melancholy Swedish illustrations—*without the qualifying opinions* of Dr. C. with reference to certain classes of cases, so utterly at variance with *all his own statistics*. For let it be especially remarked, that, lavish as he is of illustrations in support of the system of Abstinence, he does not even attempt—notwithstanding the announcement† of his intended *examination* of the merits of the assertions that the bitter beers constitute a beverage which the debilitated invalid will find most advantageous in bringing back the stomach to the due performance of its duty—I say he does not even attempt to *back* his opinions, or *prove* the correctness of his belief as to those cases in which he considers that bitter beer, or pale ale, may be beneficial, by adducing *a single experimental illustration*. Possibly he may have felt a *delicacy* as to doing so, after his defiance‡ to the advocates of bitter ale, or of any other alcoholic beverage,

\* If a glass of wine be evaporated, all the solid matter obtainable therefrom capable of nourishing the body, is about equal to one-third of the flour contained in a grain of wheat.

† Vide pp. 1, 2.

‡ Vide p. 8.



to point to a single substance in common use, whose tendency to *pervert* the normal operations of the system is to be compared for a moment with that of alcohol; and after his challenge to them to give any kind of proof \* \* \* \* \* that the performance of *any one physiological action in a healthy subject*, is in the least degree promoted by the administration of alcohol in any quantity whatever! To recommend, then, to invalids a beverage which, in the Reviewer's opinion, contains a poison and would be of a decidedly injurious tendency to those in health, appears to me to be tantamount to advising the committal of a sort of *gradual* suicide,—a species of refinement against which I, for one, take leave to register my solemn protest.

I have now nearly done, having I hope made no uncourteous use of the, generally, able arguments advanced by the Reviewer; who I hope will find, when next he requires his quiver, that none of his arrows have been blunted in my service. I admire his talents, and thank him for his research—but like one who, appreciating the hospitality of his friend, accepts, or declines, his grapes or his olives, according to his fancy, I adopt such of his views as I approve, and discard the rest. In my apprehension the Doctor resembles a man who, having safely guided others across an unbeaten and dangerous tract, on arriving at a certain point, whence a macadamized road had been formed, should quit them with this advice—“We have travelled thus far in safety, thanks to my knowledge of the country; but here I must take my leave, and my parting advice to you who are still fresh and hearty, is, to follow closely this smooth and level road; but to those who may be weak from fatigue, or faint from exhaustion, I recommend the course along the rough and rugged common. True, you may occasionally *slip*, and some may even *fall* by the way; but you will find greater *stimulus* in the route, and the *excitement* may nerve your failing limbs in your passage to your journey's end.” Whether true philosophy, or sound medical science, would dictate such a course, I leave the Readers of these pages to determine.

THE END.