

**Dublin Gastronomy Symposium: 3-4 June 2014: Cravings/Desire**  
**Dublin Institute of Technology, School of Culinary Arts & Food Technology**

**Regulation and excess: women and tea-drinking in nineteenth-century Britain**

**Tricia Cusack**

**Introduction**

The main picture shows a detail of Richard Collins's early eighteenth painting of a wealthy English family at tea. Tea in the seventeenth and the start of the eighteenth centuries was a luxury item, but by the nineteenth century it was ubiquitous in Britain and Ireland. Arthur Reade in 1884 asked rhetorically "whether there is a house in England where tea is unknown" (1884, p.15). Sarah Rose notes that "To be English was to drink tea: wives put tea on the breakfast table; the British Government paid for an empire with Tea Tax revenue" (2010, p.27). Queen Victoria is supposed to have initiated her reign by demanding: "Bring me a cup of tea and the *Times*" (Fromer 2003, p.103). In Dublin by the 1880s, tea-drinking "reached prodigious levels"; frequently drunk black with sugar, it is said to have been "boiled practically to extinction" (Clarkson and Crawford 2001, pp.103-4).

In working and poor households, tea was kept on the hob during the day, as well as drunk with meals. However, as tea-drinking spread, the more affluent classes differentiated themselves by developing a ritual of "afternoon tea". Across society, women in particular were associated with tea. With particular reference to England and Ireland, this paper considers how different tea cultures were accorded contrasting social, moral, and medical values that helped to maintain both a structure of class privilege and women's place in society. It pays particular attention to how medical writings, art and fiction helped to regulate such cultures.

**200 cups daily?**

The status of tea in relation to health was ambivalent. From the time of its introduction into Britain, its physical, psychological, and social effects were debated. A London tea merchant, Thomas Garway, in a bill printed about 1660 advised that tea "maketh the body active and lusty ... It vanquisheth heavy dreams, easeth the frame,

and strengthened the memory [and] overcometh superfluous sleep” (Sigmond 1839, p.99). According to Cornelio Bontekoe, a Dutch writer in 1678, tea demolished ill-health and “200 cups daily would not be too much” (Sigmond 1839, p.94).

The healthfulness of tea was measured by its intrinsic properties, but also by how it was prepared and the frequency of its use. Thomas Frost MD in 1750 urged moderation in consumption: “[tea] should be drank moderately, and in the afternoon chiefly, and not made too habitual” (Reade 1884, pp.112-3). In a treatise on tea published in Dublin in 1772, John Coakley Lettsom MDFS A concluded that: “[t]ea, if not too fine, if not drank too hot, nor in too great quantities, is perhaps preferable to any other vegetable infusion we know”. However, Lettsom found tea could cause bodily agitation:

Even the finer kinds of ... Teas ... affect the nerves, produce tremblings, and such a state of body for the time, as subjects it to be agitated by the most trifling causes, shutting a door too hastily, the sudden entrance even of a servant (1772, p.57).

Mixed opinions on the virtues of tea continued into the Victorian period. Tea was commended by Florence Nightingale as a restorative for the sick: “When you see the natural and almost universal craving in English sick for their ‘tea’, you cannot but feel that Nature knows what she is about.” However, like Frost and Lettsom earlier, Nightingale qualified her endorsement with a plea for moderation by adding: “But a little tea ... restores them quite as much as a great deal” (Beeton 1982, p.899). G.G. Sigmond in his book on *Tea; Its Effects, Medicinal and Moral* published in 1839 suggested tea could “call into action the energies of nations” and stimulate “the exertion of ... intellectual power” (1839, pp.1-2).

### **Women and ‘sweet ordering’**

However, such ‘intellectual power’ was not credited to women. John Ruskin for example from 1864 articulated his authoritative diminishment of women, asserting that: “her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering” (1904, p.107). Janet Wolff notes how a “‘separation of spheres’ of male and female, public and private, was ... reinforced and maintained by cultural ideologies, practices and institutions” (1988, p.117). Women were portrayed as physically and psychologically fragile, and medicalised as nervous, prone to hysterical illnesses and generally less

stable than men. Claims about women's weaknesses, backed by pseudo-science, were followed by further assertions about their proper role in society. Women were said to be naturally suited to an interior life in the home. Isabella Beeton asserted in 1861 "Of all those acquirements, which more particularly belong to the feminine character, there are none which take a higher rank, in our estimation, than such as enter into a knowledge of household duties; for on these are perpetually dependent the happiness, comfort, and well-being of a family" (1982, p.1). Women were thought to have a special inclination and duty to nurture and safeguard the physical and moral health of the family, through their example and through their household management. The serving of tea became one of their duties. In this painting by George Elgar Hicks, *Woman's Mission: Companion of Manhood* (1863), we can see the wife as 'ministering angel' beside the neatly laid teatable.

According to various authorities from at least the eighteenth century, women were especially susceptible to the effects of tea. Thus Frost asserted that: "A moderate use of tea of a due strength seems better adapted to the fair sex than men ... naturally being of a more lax and delicate make ... as also because they have less exercise or head-labours". Women were said to be especially prone to psychological problems enhanced by excessive tea-drinking (Miller 2013, p.433). The *Kildare Observer* in 1882, perhaps slightly tongue-in-cheek, discussed a report in the *Daily News* about the effects of tea drinking on women's habits and constitution:

An Atrabilious [melancholy] writer in the *Daily News* almost alarms me. He declares that afternoon teas are the curse of the country; that mother and sisters are tea-stricken ... After painting a distressing picture of the feebleness of the average lady at dinner, he goes on to explain that this is to be attributed to the large quantity of tea and cakes and crumpets consumed but a couple of hours before. Nothing, says the writer but the abolition of afternoon tea as an institution in this country will remedy the evil (1 July 1882, p.3).

However, if such reports mock women of the upper and middle classes, the main targets of the ill-effects of tea-drinking were working class and poor women, whose craving for tea was claimed to destroy family life. The Dean of Bangor typically preached that excessive tea-drinking was "acting as a dangerous revolutionary force among us", because tea-drinking led to the gin bottle "and the physical and nervous weakness, that had its origin in the bad cookery of an ignorant wife, ended in ruin,

intemperance, and disease” (Reade 1884, p.127). Poor women were destroyed by their tea habit.

### **A Discourse of Moderation and Excess**

Over the nineteenth century, a discourse of moderation and excess developed around tea consumption that divided along social class lines. In the early part of the century, the Temperance Movement was influential in encouraging the spread of tea-drinking. The tea trade in both Ireland and England was dominated by religious nonconformists, Quakers and others, sympathetic to the Temperance Movement which advocated tea as a healthy substitute for alcohol (Griffiths 2011, p.329). Church members such as the Irish Quaker Mary John Knott played a part in distributing Temperance literature. Knott visited schools in Kilkee in 1835 and recorded that “We gave temperance publications to each of the school-masters” (1836, p.110). Large Temperance tea-parties for reformed alcohol drinkers were held in various towns and cities.

The Temperance movement lost impetus later in the nineteenth century, when tea-drinking had become widespread in both England and Ireland (Reade 1884, p.38). As Georg Simmel argued in 1904, the fashions of the elite class were imitated by other classes, at which point the elite adopted new fashions by which to distinguish themselves: “Just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn ... the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in its turn differentiates them from the masses” (1957, p.545). It has been suggested that Simmel’s theory did not hold in the case of tea consumption because it was taken up by the working classes in the nineteenth century, but retained by the elite (Smith 1992, p.266). However, Simmel’s theory does hold here, because the upper and middle classes soon demarcated themselves from the lower classes through their particular tea culture. Tea in itself was not rejected, but where and how it was consumed, and by whom, became the subject of medical and moral discourses that focused on women and class.

The upper and middle classes represented themselves as refined and moderate in their tea habits, while the poorer classes were characterised as careless in their preparation of tea, and excessive in its consumption. Whilst tea for the elite classes was associated with civility, moderation and decorum, the discourse around working class tea drinking became one of excess, ill-health, and wifely neglect (Miller 2013,

pp.419-21, 425, 428, 431-2). Tea might be taken by all, but the time and manner of its taking were quite distinctive.

Among the affluent classes, tea-drinking acquired a particular social and cultural niche as “Tea rapidly became a favourite way ... of signifying civility and taste” (Rose 2010, pp.26, 264). The ritual of afternoon tea was developed and promoted through such images as George Goodwin Kilburne’s *Afternoon Tea* (n.d.). The ceremony was available for those who were at leisure in the afternoon, who could afford the necessary utensils, and who were acquainted with the appropriate etiquette. The upper and middle classes could claim moderation in the frequency and duration of their tea consumption insofar as they drank tea at specified times, as for afternoon tea, and not too much of it, nor over too long a period. Moreover they could claim to be knowledgeable about its preparation, being equipped with books of etiquette advocating best tea practices. The tea ceremony thus became an emblem of social status in England, and in Ireland especially among the Anglo-Irish, with an appropriate time and dress, fine teas, fashionable little tea- tables, and expensive table-ware.

The poorer classes, on the other hand, were deemed ignorant of correct preparation, allowing the tea to stew between drinks and unable to restrain themselves from drinking it to excess. A Dr Poore observed that:

The rich man who wishes to avoid an excess of tannic acid in the ‘cup that cheers’, does not allow the water to stand on the tea for more than five, or at most eight minutes, and the resulting beverage is aromatic, not too astringent, and wholesome. The poor man or poor woman allows the tea to simmer on the hob for indefinite periods, with the result that a highly astringent and unwholesome beverage is obtained.

Dr Poore added that: “There can be no doubt that the habit of drinking excessive quantities of strong astringent tea is a not uncommon cause of ... dyspepsia ... among poor women of the class of sempstresses” (Reade 1884, p.61). In England, tea consumption by poor families was condemned from the late eighteenth century also on grounds that it represented irresponsible spending, encouraged idleness, and undermined women’s family role (O’Connell 2012, pp.33, 37). Lettsom, speaking earlier of “[p]oor labouring people”, observed that “Many ... too desirous of vieing with their superiors, and imitating their luxuries, throw away their little earnings upon

this fashionable herb” (1772, p.79). In Ireland, a can or teapot remained on the hob and tea could be brewed ten times a day (Mahon 1998, p.40). In this illustration after a painting by Erskine Nicol, the teapot can be made out on the stove behind. In fact, tea became ubiquitous amongst poorer Irish families, and a sign of sociability: “The tea on the draw, the ever-ready offer of a cup to a neighbour, was a sign of hospitality” (Mahon 1998, 40). However, an inspector for the Congested Districts Board in Donegal in the 1890s found that “tea is taken to an extent which their means do not warrant, by both better-off families and the poorest. Children and adults alike drink it. The tea is boiled or stewed for about half an hour before it is taken” (Farrar 1988, p.21). Discourses around tea combined to condemn the tea culture of the poor and working class, where wives spent their little money on tea instead of nourishing food, where the tea was ill-prepared by constant boiling rather than infusion, and where it was drunk to excess (Miller 2013, pp.423-4; O’Connell 2012, pp.33-4, 38).

The vocabulary of excess applied to poor and working-class tea habits is impressive. Thomas King Chambers, a London physician, in 1870 claimed that “[m]uch ill-health arises among women of the lower orders in this country from the custom of *sluicing* themselves with tea” (Miller 2013, p.428; my emphasis). According to John Thomas Arlidge (1872), who initiated the practice of occupational medicine, declining health amongst the working class was due to their habit of tea-drinking, tea being “a form of animal indulgence which is as distinctly sensual, extravagant and pernicious as any beer-swilling or gin drinking” (Miller 2013, p.429). The Dean of Bangor in 1883 asserted that “if a woman does not know how to cook and to make the best of the resources within her reach, she boils the kettle forever, and enfeebles her husband and sons by *drenching* them with *oceans* of tea, morning, noon and night” (Miller 2013, p.431; my emphasis). Such habits were said to result in vulnerability to disease, general ill-health, nervousness, psychological disturbance and familial neglect. An inquiry in Ireland of 1894 concluded that the consumption of inferior stewed tea among the poorer classes contributed to a large increase in psychological problems and admissions to asylums (Miller 2013, p.434).

The tea habits of the poorer classes were therefore viewed as unhealthy but also as inimical to family life. Tea was foreign to the traditional rural diet which symbolised stability and provided the men of the house with nourishing food. Furthermore, tea-drinking among women was associated with idleness, and indulgence

in the addictive pleasure of tea was seen as a dangerous sign of indiscipline which undermined their duties as wives and mothers (O'Connell 2012, pp.32-3, 36-7, 43). Helen O'Connell suggests that anxiety about tea-drinking among poor women in early nineteenth-century Ireland was enhanced by the fact that most belonged to the majority Catholic population and therefore were already deemed to constitute a potential threat to the integrity of the Union (2012, p.37).

### **Respectability and restraint**

Tea-drinking among the poor became a source of anxiety for middle- and upper class "improvers" for its supposed deleterious effects on both the physical body and the social body. The addictive properties of tea, and also its association with leisure, congregation and conviviality, made it a target for 'improvement' literature and visual art in both England and Ireland, aimed at the poorer classes, such as this image of *Temperance* (1890). Such art and literature attempted to change the tea habits of the lower classes by inculcating the middle-class virtue of respectability through the practices of moderation and proper etiquette in tea-drinking. Respectability, unlike gentility which depended on birth, represented "an assertion of a person's moral worth *as an individual*, demonstrated primarily by behaviour" (Smith 1992, pp.275-6). Respectable behaviour focused on such attributes as "moderation in spending and dress, domestic order and affection, and individual self-control" (Smith 1992, p.276). Curbing the habit of unrestrained tea-drinking would thus contribute to working-class respectability. Improvement literature sought to inculcate norms of middle class respectability in the poorer classes, in contradistinction to parallel attempts by the elite to establish boundaries of difference between themselves and the lower classes. As well as seeking to modify or 'improve' the conduct of the poorer classes, improvement literature and art reinforced an existing gender ideology that took for granted women's domestic and family roles.

In Ireland, fictional stories such as Mary Leadbeater's *Cottage Dialogues Among the Irish Peasantry* of 1811, widely distributed in rural communities, set "good" female characters who abstained from tea-drinking against "bad" ones who did not, and who suffered the consequences of inharmonious family life, personal deterioration and early death (O'Connell 2012, pp.32-3, 43-4). Leadbeter uses the device of a well-behaved young Irish woman, Rose, who advises Nancy, a servant,

inclined to pleasing herself. Rose counsels her against the indulgence of tea-drinking. When Nancy complains of not having enough tea from her mistress, Rose asks: “What would you do in a house of your own? you [sic] could not afford to drink tea, and you would be hankering after it, when you got the way of it” (1811, p.49). When Nancy is tempted to accept nursing, her husband Tim reinforces the moral message, telling her ‘it was fitter ... to keep my children whole and clean, and get his bit ready for him, than go flaunting in fine clothes, and learn to drink tea again”.

By the 1830s, the family was the paradigm for the economic and political ordering of the urban workers, accompanying a great effort towards the ‘moralization of the poorer classes’ (Foucault 1990, p.122). It was the wife’s duty to create an orderly and welcoming space for the man returning home from his work (see Wolff 1990, p.13), and paintings such as Joseph Clark’s *The Labourer’s Welcome* offered a model of wifely behaviour. Clark portrays the virtuous and worthily occupied labourer’s wife waiting at home with the tea ready for her husband’s return. In Jane Maria Bowkett’s *Time for Tea*, a woman similarly awaits her husband’s return with table laid as an approaching train heralds his arrival. The anticipated timing (*Time for Tea*); the set meal; the industrious preparation including well-schooled children warming his slippers by the fire, all indicate moderation, discipline, and respectability.

### **The femininity of tea-drinking**

George Goodwin Kilburne’s *Two for Tea* (n.d.), pictured to your left, depicts a carefully choreographed afternoon tea between two well-dressed women in an affluent setting. However, among Victorian middle-class women, tea-parties were less a chosen pastime than one of a limited number of options for employment. Women were largely excluded from both work and public life. For example, they were excluded from coffee houses which were places for all kinds of debate among men. In effect, the conventions of afternoon tea as practised by upper and middle class women were another means of social control in a patriarchal society. Women partaking in afternoon tea were subject to rules that not only confined them to a domestic setting but prohibited behaviour or exchange defined as unfeminine.

Simmel offered some interesting observations on women’s social status and their relation to fashion, which might be applied to women’s participation in the ritual of afternoon tea. Simmel suggested that because of women’s historically low social



status, they tended to adhere to custom in outlook and conduct, while seeking a measure of individual expression through fashion:

The relation and the weakness of her social position, to which woman has been doomed ... explains her strict regard for custom ... for all that is proper ... But resting on the firm foundation of custom ... woman strives ... for all the relative individualization and personal conspicuousness that remains ... it seems as though fashion were the valve through which woman's craving for some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence finds vent, when its satisfaction is denied her in other fields (1957, pp.550-1).

The tea gowns seen here were designed especially for the fashionable ritual of afternoon tea. However, if following a fashionable pursuit offered women some means of self-expression, rules for the tea ceremony, codified in books of etiquette, not only constrained how women should spend their time, and what they might wear, but how they should converse. Indeed, the tea ritual, as Mary Heath argues, represented “subservience and entrapment” (2012). Etiquette books advised that nothing of substance should be discussed at the tea-table. Artists and authors colluded in such prescriptions by depicting gossipy female tea-drinkers, as in paintings like Matthias Robinson's *A Gossip over a Cup of Tea* (n.d.), or book illustrations such as *If Lady O'Shane would show more spirit*. For domestic tea-parties, handbooks of etiquette, mainly written by men, laid down not only detailed rules about presentation, but the mode of conversation that would be appropriate. For example, according to such guides as *A Manual of Etiquette for Ladies* of 1856, the women's tea-table should not host argument nor contentious issues since: “in order to converse agreeably and intelligibly, a lady should cultivate her intellect, not with the idea of becoming a blue-stocking or a pedant, but to render her society pleasant and profitable to others” (Heath 2012). There are common features here with Mary Leadbeater's *Cottage Dialogues* which albeit written by a woman were intended to exercise control over the otherwise unruly nature of women.

### **Exceeding the conventions**

I will finish with some fictional and historical examples where such tea-table conventions were undermined. In the novel *Castle Rackrent* by the Anglo-Irish author Maria Edgeworth, first published in Dublin and London in 1800, Edgeworth recounts

a rebellious upper-class mode of taking tea with “dances and balls, and the ladies all finishing with a raking pot of tea in the morning when “all prudish decorums are forgotten.” (1895, p.38).

*Her Ladyships Boudoir - Tea & Music*. “We’ve all been a hunting today” - sung by Trivy & rapturously encored, shown here at bottom right, depicts a hunting tea, a type common in Anglo-Ireland (Hopley 2009, p.67). This drawing, attributed to Colonel James Smyth (1839-1916) of Gaybrook House, County Westmeath and published in 1899, depicts Lady Smyth at the tea-table entertaining fellow hunters. She and one of the huntsmen extend their arms towards each other as if singing in harmony to the music. The Anglo-Irish here again indulge in riotous jolliness which fails to adhere to the decorum of afternoon tea in Victorian England. Such representations suggest the possibility of transgressions among the Anglo-Irish of the English model of civility.

In England in the early 1840s, women campaigning against the Corn Laws, which restricted cereal imports, organised huge tea-parties to raise awareness and funds (see Reade 1884, pp.40-1). Their activities were duly criticised for displaying a reprehensible lack of femininity. J. Croker, writing in the conservative *Quarterly Review* in December 1842, referred to “the frequent exhibition which these anti-Corn Law associations make of *female* countenance and co-operation – a practice ... offensive to good taste and good feeling, and destructive of the most amiable and valuable qualities of the female character”. Referring to an anti-Corn Law tea-party intended for 20<sup>th</sup> May 1841, Croker, apparently unable to conceive of independent female action, regretted that members of the Manchester anti-Corn Law Association “should have chosen to exhibit their wives and daughters in the character of political agitators” (Croker 1842, p.287).

To conclude, there was much early debate about the healthfulness of tea, and enthusiasm for its properties as a stimulant, to which women were thought particularly susceptible. As tea-drinking spread in nineteenth-century England and Ireland, the upper and middle classes indulged in the ritual of afternoon tea, differentiating themselves from the lower classes. A discourse of moderation and excess in tea-drinking developed on social class lines and focused upon women. Poor and working-class women were castigated as ignorant, and excessive in their consumption of tea, which was seen as harmful to health and detrimental to their families. Improvement

literature and art responded to middle class anxieties about the perceived social problems of unregulated tea-drinking by aiming to inculcate norms of respectability. Among upper and middle class women meanwhile, afternoon tea provided an opportunity to express their fashionableness, and to display refinement and moderation in their conduct, but it also signified women's 'entrapment' in a patriarchal society. Both poor women guilty of the excessive consumption of tea, and women who failed to abide by the correct etiquette for the tea-table, were regarded as contravening women's proper role in society and undermining family and social life.

4536 words

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