

# DRINK AND ILLICIT DISTILLATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY MANCHESTER

Mary Turner

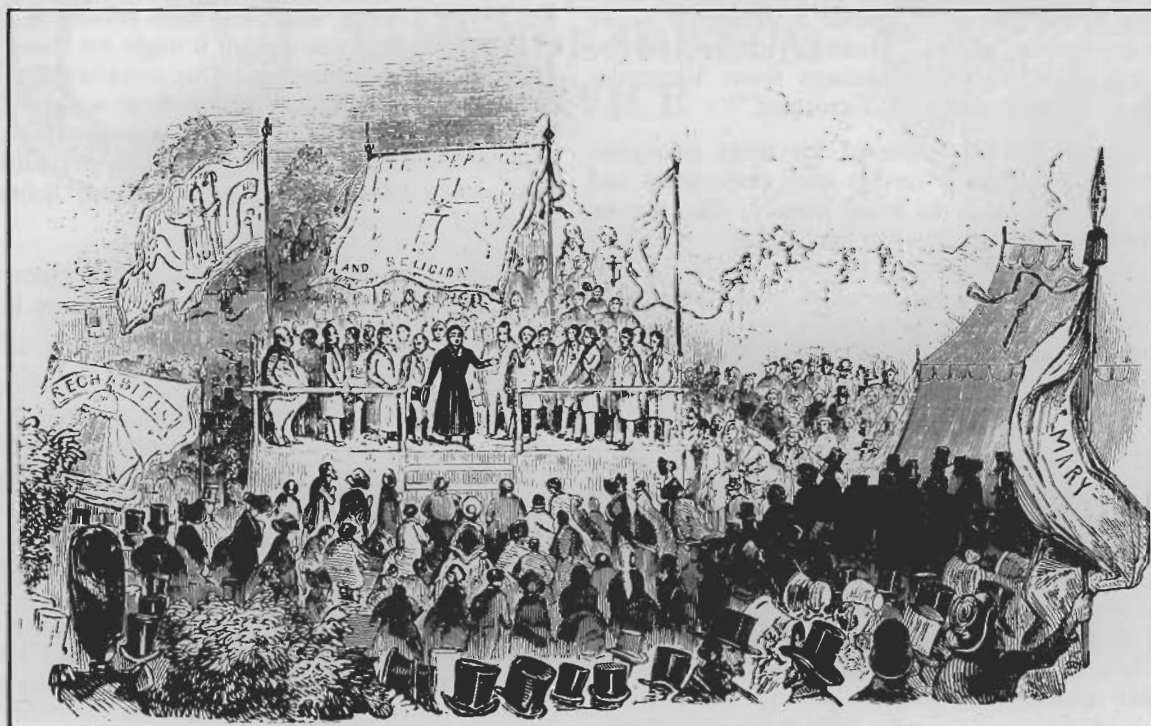
For a long time now the two related topics of drink and temperance have provided an interesting subject for my teaching of the history of nineteenth-century Collyhurst. As my research has gone on, I have become aware of the importance that drink and the public house had in working-class districts like Collyhurst and Ancoats. The large number of pubs and beerhouses which crowded into these areas was evident from the town's directories. Some of the pub names — The Exiles of Erin — indicate that these were also areas into which a considerable number of Irish immigrants settled during the early decades of the nineteenth century. The police reports in the local newspapers referring to the crimes associated with drink opened up another area of the subject. Brief notices of individuals arrested for being drunk and disorderly jostled with more lengthy reports of inquests — held in pubs — of individuals who had died apparently due to drink. Hannah Benson's death in 1826 prompted the following newspaper report:

*CORONER'S INQUEST — A great sensation was produced in Oldham Road and the neighbourhood on Monday night, in consequence of a woman named Hannah Benson having been found dead in a cellar-hole in the above thoroughfare, under circumstances which partially created a suspicion that she had been murdered. When the woman was first discovered, a man named Holme was at the foot of the cellar-steps endeavouring to lift her up; and upon being questioned by a person who happened to be passing at the time, as to his name, he ran off, followed, however, by several individuals, who cried out "stop him." He was immediately overtaken*

*and brought back; and not giving to the bystanders what they considered to be a satisfactory account of his conduct, he was conveyed to the New Bailey prison. On Tuesday an Inquest was held upon the body, before John Milne, Esq., Coroner, at the Golden Lion, in Oldham Road, and Holme was brought up in custody. The house was surrounded by nearly two thousand persons. From the evidence adduced on the inquiry it will be seen, there was not the slightest ground to suppose that the death of the unfortunate woman was caused by any violence from Holme; but, from the disgracefully drunken state in which they both were at the time, it appears probable, that she accidentally fell into the cellar-hole whilst they were passing, and that the injuries she received from the fall produced the fatal event.*

Alcohol must have brought pleasure to the lives of many people who found in Manchester pubs a place to meet friends, to gossip and joke after a long day's work. For others the pursuit of a temporary alcoholic utopia descended into alcoholism, a condition which afflicted not only those who drank, but their children, who were overlaid in bed, injured by accident, or treated cruelly by a drunken parent. Such concerns helped swell support for the temperance movement. An examination of the Manchester newspapers after 1830 provides a great deal of material about the activities of a number of local temperance societies. Some societies believed in a policy of moderation whilst the views of others hardened into total abstinence.

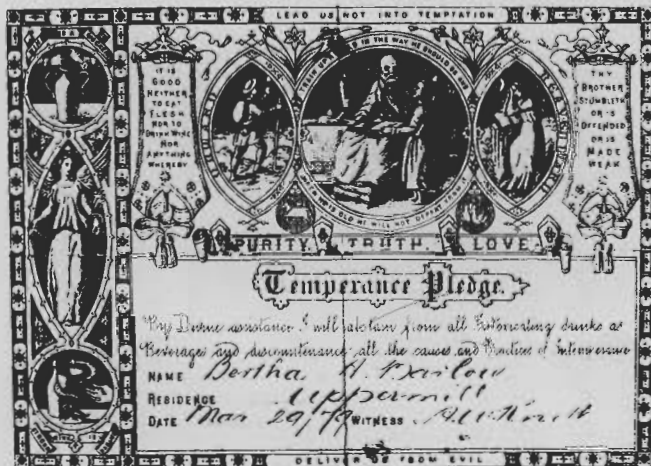
Temperance societies established themselves in Manchester in the early 1830s drawing upon the experience of societies



Father Mathew administering the pledge, 1843

in Ireland. Through public meetings, the local newspapers and their own publications they tried to convince all social classes of the dangers of drink. It was a hard struggle given the number of pubs in Manchester and the ease with which alcohol could be obtained. In August 1857, the Manchester and Salford Temperance Society was appealing yet again for funds. They seemed not to have much confidence that they had done much to reduce the effects of strong drink, the address saying "The victims of strong drink are being constantly multiplied and are to be found in all ranks and classes of the community — among the most educated and refined, as well as the ignorant and brutalized..." and so it goes on. Subscriptions were to be not less than one shilling per year, in advance, and the constitution includes financial guidance and states there shall not be any sectarian religious bias or purely political aims. What they did, beyond having public meetings and lectures and publishing and providing statistics, is not clear. One is reminded of the belief that the provision of drinking fountains in busy streets and in public parks was intended to do something to offset the need for alcoholic liquor. A census of the use of drinking fountains was taken in Liverpool in 1856 in the docklands area which had its share of Irish, and this showed that each fountain had more than 2,500 persons coming for a drink during the day. When I was a child there were cast-iron drinking fountains in the Manchester parks with cups on chains. In an elementary effort at hygiene we used to fill the cup and then put a forefinger along the rim of the cup and drink over that. I doubt if our filthy fingers were any protection whatsoever and for some reason that I can't explain I doubt if any infection was passed by this communal drinking system.

Temperance workers found much to do in Ancoats and Collyhurst where the Irish in particular were regarded as heavy drinkers. It is difficult to judge how successful their efforts were in weaning men and women away from the pub. In 1843 the visit of Father Mathew, one of the best known temperance campaigners, was a high point in the efforts of local temperance activists among the Manchester Irish. Father Mathew, a Franciscan, had himself taken the pledge in Cork in 1838, which he did with the words "Here goes — in the name of the Lord" and he is reputed to have persuaded half the population of Ireland to have taken the pledge. Revenue from duties on Irish spirits fell from about £1.5 million in 1839 to £52,418 in 1844, said to have been due to his influence. W.E. Axon, in his *Annals of Manchester* for 1843, says that in July Father Mathew arrived in Manchester and



Temperance pledge

MANCHESTER AND SALFORD

# Temperance Journal.

TO BE PUBLISHED WEEKLY,  
UNDER THE SUPERINTENDANCE OF THE RED BANK TEMPERANCE COMMITTEE.  
EDITED BY W. GREENHAW.

No. 1.) SATURDAY, March, 12, 1836. PRICE ONE PENNY.

INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS.

Upon the first appearance of a new publication, it is natural for the public to make enquiries respecting its origin, its nature, and the intentions of the Editor; and as often, upon the first impressions made, depends the ultimate success of the work. We shall aim at perspicuity in our explanations.

The TEMPERANCE JOURNAL is of humble origin; every individual connected with it belongs to that class for whose use it is most especially intended—the Operatives. But upon that account we fear nothing. To excite and to convey new things are impossible; and

It is our intention to introduce reports of Lectures and Speeches delivered at Temperance Meetings. There is much valuable matter at present lost for want of the means of preservation. Many speeches delivered by Reformed Drunkards are valuable, as they show the gradual influence which intoxicating drinks exercise upon the system previous to enervating the mind, and degrading the man.— Speeches from such persons often expose the low tricks of individuals engaged in the public barroom, to obtain the money of foolish men. Such exposures are valuable, as they serve to inspire disgust in numbers who have themselves been duped. The speeches of Reformed Drunkards are instructive and amusing, and will find ready insertion

Manchester and Salford Temperance Journal, first number

preached at St. Patrick's Chapel, Livesey Street, Collyhurst. A tea party was given in his honour at the Free Trade Hall, at which 3,000 persons were present, and he administered the temperance pledge to many thousands of people.

In accumulating this information on drink and temperance I also came across reference to the illicit distillation of spirits among the Irish in Manchester. However until I went to Ireland and gathered copies of papers written by other historians, travelled around and saw many statues of Father Mathew and streets in his name, and observed how many pubs there are in Dublin and other towns, despite demolition of older properties, it had never occurred to me to regard the illicit distillation of poteen — pronounced pocheen — as an important trade or occupation.

"Illicit Distillation: an Irish Peasant Industry" (*Historical Studies*, No.3, 1961) by K.H. Connell gave me a completely new view of the whole matter. The first sentence of this paper states:

*In 1661, with the reintroduction of an excise duty on Irish spirit, the struggle between 'parliament' whiskey and poteen was resumed, a struggle in which the rout of the illicit distiller took a couple of centuries, and which, even still, he survives.*

Connell indicates that ill-conceived excise regulations specially favoured the poteen maker. The original duty on Irish spirit was 4d a gallon; it reached 1s 2d by 1785 and climbed steeply during the wars to 6s 1½d in 1815, when parliament whiskey was selling for nine or ten shillings a gallon. It was questionably wise to increase so substantially the price an impoverished people was asked to pay for parliament whiskey; a people, moreover, whose social life was hinged to cheap drink; who knew how to make poteen and were not notably law-abiding. The regulations hampered the legal trade so much that its produce was unpalatable to many an Irish consumer and as these fiscal arrangements forced many local stills out of legitimate business, many of their customers turned to the poteen maker where they were remote from the surviving licensed distilleries.

Malt produced an excellent liquor but was treacherous for the illegal distiller. It needed time and space to be good. Raw grain also was used and in turn molasses, sugar, treacle, porter, and 'almost anything' including potatoes, rhubarb, apples, blackberries and currants. Doubtless these were less palatable but cheap they certainly were. As somebody who hasn't drunk so much whiskey

in 45 years I thought the poteen I was given to taste when in Ireland was absolutely vile.

There were four important parts to distilling apparatus, the most important (and most seized) being the worm, a coiled tube from which the spirit emerged. The second distillation was the real pure stuff and the first noggin was often given to the fairies. A second distillation of this second run emerged as a pure limpid spirit of high quality. Copper was the best and most expensive material for making a still, but tin, lighter and cheaper often had to suffice. Travelling tinkers could and did repair tin stills. Some stills held no more than ten gallons, others as much as eighty. Prices varied and there were also many makeshift sets of apparatus — and some danger when the worm was made of lead piping. Yet a complete still could be made simply from a kettle and a mug.

The distiller's capital was too slight to allow him to let the poteen mature and the longer he kept the spirit the greater the risk of theft and detection. Many customers liked their whiskey 'hot all the way down' and to enliven it vitriol might be added by the distiller. The by-products from distilling were highly prized as cattle-food, though they could be incriminating if left lying around.

Secrecy was essential in all stages of the operation. The choice of site was important; an isolated place, a scattered local population, no police stationed nearby, peat and water must be to hand and running water was a great help. Delivering the poteen was also a clandestine business. Poteen has travelled from distiller to drinker hidden in the turf cart, in tin cases, in casks, in tin pockets for a woman's dress, in the shape of a female breast, and a head-and-body shape which was dressed to resemble the man's wife and rode to market, filled with poteen, on the pillion behind him! Coffins too, have borne their burden, bottles have been hidden in the Christmas turkey and in this way odd bottles still escape the British customs. With steady demand and ingenuity such as this, no wonder the trade flourished from at least the early nineteenth century onward.

Just exactly how widespread poteen manufacture was in Ireland is unknown but it is clear that as the Irish settled in England they carried the practice over the water. When people migrate they take their culture with them. How long that culture persists depends on a number of factors. It was known that there was much illicit distillation in and around Collyhurst and Ancoats in the first half of the nineteenth century, because there were frequent newspaper reports of arrests and convictions of Irish people in connection therewith. A report from the *Manchester Mercury* of January 5 1830 is but one example of the existence of illicit stills in a neighbourhood settled by the Irish.

**DESPERATE OUTRAGES** — *The neighbourhood of Oldham Road, proverbial as it almost is for scenes of riot and disturbance, was scarcely ever in a more agitated state than it was for a short time on Saturday night week. Some excise officers, having information that an illicit whiskey still was in operation in a court behind the Clock Face public house, in Oldham Road, proceeded hither, in company with a number of police officers. On getting into the house, they found a young man below, and, upstairs, in a room with no person in it, a still in full work. The man was, of course, immediately seized; but such was his resistance and great*

*strength, that a period of from ten minutes to a quarter of an hour elapsed before the united force of all the officers was available to fix the handcuffs upon him. This being done, they conveyed their prisoner out of the court; but no sooner he got outside, than he peremptorily declared that he would go no further, then threw himself down upon the ground, and set up a loud Irish cry, which immediately brought to the spot a great number of people, who forthwith attacked the officers with sticks, stones, and brickbats. A battle royal ensued between them, and whilst some part of the officers, with such of the better disposed part of the neighbourhood who came to their assistance, were keeping off their assailants as well as they could, Moss and other officers were doing their utmost to persuade their prisoner to get up, but without avail; Moss first broke his stick (and the sticks the police carry are no twigs), upon him; but this being of no avail, and the fellow still crying out for rescue, Moss took out his constable's staff, and in the end broke that too. Nothing, however, could induce the man to stir; and the attack upon the officers at length became so serious that they, in self defence, were obliged to draw their cutlasses, and proceed to extremities with the mob. Their prisoner was severely wounded, as were several other persons in the affray. Eventually the officers were obliged to carry the man, and literally to fight every inch of their way to the lock-up, brickbats and other missiles flying upon them from the corner of every street.*

As one gets older and gathers more experience, parallels spring to mind. After the 1939-45 war there were reports in the newspapers about Polish people being taken to court for the illicit distillation of vodka. Memory tells me these men, having come through a grievous war, were merely reverting to their old pre-war habits in Poland and producing a liquor which they understood well and

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Port, 3	Doz.	20
Port, 4	Doz.	15
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Sherry, 2	Doz.	24
Sherry, 3	Doz.	20
Superior Light Dinner Sherry, 4	Doz.	15
Brandy	Doz.	30
Best Imported	Doz.	25
White Malaga	Doz.	18
Superior Malaga	Doz.	15
Malaga	Doz.	12
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Price list of Manchester wine merchants, 1850.

# THE WHISKEY TAX.

(Ain:—Paddy's Evermore.)

Come all you lovers of the drop, wherever that you be,  
And list to what John Bull has done, as you shall plainly see,  
He has raised the Irish whiskey a halfpenny in the glass,  
Whoever drinks it at the price, must be a stupid ass.

Oh, John Bull has his beer quite cheap, while we the piper pay,  
But let us now unite as one, and to the Saxon say—  
We'll drink no more, we do protest to fill your pocket full,  
We've done it long, but now we see, your game, my old John Bull.

Our great home trade, the only one, we're left, they would destroy  
The trade, that beggars makes galore, and paupers too, my boy,  
That fills the jails and workhouses, and vagabonds still makes,  
And to the army gives recruits, and manufactures scrapes.

Oh the temperance party 'twas who raised the price of drink, 'tis  
dear,  
The staff of life the poor man's friend, as plain it must appear,  
The government too, wants to get, the cash to carry on,  
The war with Osman Digna, and the Russian Cossacks Don!

Now just to spite them let us spend our money not on stuff  
That England's coffers may enrich and make us poor enough,  
That pays her armies and police to crush our hapless land,  
Let's show them that they can't cajole the boys of Paddy's land.

The publicans like heroes great and always wide awake,  
Opposed are to this heavy tax all for the poor man's sake,  
These patriots protested well, but still it was no go,  
The Saxon had his pound of flesh no matter who said 'no.'

Our leaders true, Parnell and all, fought against the tax, unfair,  
And wont we back them out my boys, and for the future swear,  
We'll drink no more this whiskey just to show them what we mean  
With something else our throats we'll wet, and raise the banner  
green.

ARGUS.

## Ballad lamenting increased tax on whiskey

liked to drink. Presumably they were also supplying it to friends, at a charge, and this was where part of the illegality came in.

The papers of the Pritchard family in Manchester Central Reference Library Archives (M375) throw additional light on how this cottage industry operated in Manchester. They are the same family who were dispensing chemists and who produced Pritchard's teething powder for children (plenty of which I have had pushed down my wailing throat, believe you me!) and their last shop closed only in about 1976.

Joshua Pritchard was employed by the Excise in Manchester in the 1830s and 1840s and his reports, in the form of requests for expenses and rewards, detail raids, arrests and prosecutions against illegal distillers. Many of these reports relate to the Collyhurst and Ancoats area, a neighbourhood which in Pritchard's words was "inhabited by the lower order of Irish and who are of a very dangerous character". Others refer to the Little Ireland area of the town. Quotation in full of one of the reports will give you some idea of the whole.

Mr. Lamming Pa.1 9635/31

Sir,  
Patrick Gallagan, Cheshire Cheese Court,  
Newton Lane

Thomas Turtle and Joshua Pritchard having on the 9th inst. recd. informan. that a private still would be worked by one Edwd. Magee, in a cellar, in a court, back of the Cheshire Cheese Public House, Newton Lane, Manchester, that neighbourhood being chiefly inhabited by the lower order of Irish, at 1pm they procured the assistance of four armed police officers, and went to the place, and saw a man (Patrick Gallagan) escape out of the cellar, the officers seized him and after considerable resistance by Gallagan, the officers conveyed him back into the cellar and there they found a complete distillery, which consisted of 1 still about 40 gallons and at wk., still head, looming, worm, tub, 2 other tubs and several jars & bottles, together with about 60 gallons of wash & ten of low wines, all of which to prevent a rescue the officers destroyed and conveyed the said Patrick Gallagan and Edwd. Magee, against whom the information was, & whom the officers found in the said Gallagan's house, same yard as the still was in (lest Gallagan should state that the still belonged to him, Magee) and convd. them to Mchester Lock-up from whence they were convd. this morning to New Bailey, Salford & took their trials before J.F. Foster, Esq. Magistrate, who acquitted Magee and convicted Gallagan in the penalty of £60, he having before been taken by us for private distillation and in default of payment committed him to New Bailey prison, Salford, for six months.

Pritchard's accounts show clearly that illicit distillation was well-established amongst the Irish who had settled in Manchester, though it was not an activity completely monopolised by them. The resistance which surrounded the authorities' attempts to destroy stills and prosecute

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31, PICCADILLY, MANCHESTER,

AND

BELFAST.

Whiskey advert, 1852

the distillers also indicates that the Irish community regarded such distilling with sympathy. Judging by the number of police Pritchard had accompany him on his raids it is evident that he expected resistance. Having been provided with information that a still was operating at No.133 George's Road, Pritchard arranged for *twelve* armed police officers to assist him. Aware that lookouts were in use, six of the officers were sent by coach. On this occasion the operation was successful, a still was discovered, and Patrick Burne and Catherine Watson were removed speedily by coach into custody before a rescue could be attempted.

On other occasions Pritchard's information was less reliable. On January 13th 1832 Pritchard's expectation of finding a private still in Pump Street, off George's Street, proved false. Additional information took Pritchard and four armed police to a neighbouring property where once again there was no still, only "a strong smell of whiskey and several bladders used for carrying whiskey out with". On these and other occasions when Pritchard drew a blank it was evident that the distillers were well organised and that it was not easy for Pritchard and the police to enter these districts of the town with the speed and secrecy they would have liked.

Reading Pritchard's reports it is clear that not only was there hostility towards the Excise and police but that women were prominent in opposing the authorities and defending their neighbours. Indeed, as the cases of Ann Murphy of Newton Lane, Ellen O'Hara of Back Thomas Street, and Jane McStay of Mary Street, Little Ireland show, women were deeply involved in the whole business of distilling. A raid in November 1831 on a house on Pump Street discovered a still being operated by three women. However word had spread quickly in the neighbourhood of the arrival of the excise and four police. As Pritchard noted:

*Whilst we were destroying the concern a great number of Irish collected and the handcuffs being rather large for them the Officers also used handkerchiefs to assist in securing them, as soon as we left the house, the mob, women, rushed instantly upon us whilst the men continued in the rear, we not liking to use violence to the women, they continued in a heap to gather and Mary Lynch was rescued from us and took one of the handkerchiefs before we were aware of her escape, the mob followed us a considerable distance and endeavoured to get up a row, by calling other persons to come to their help.*

The police armed with cutlasses and pistols managed eventually to remove the other two women although in the fight Pritchard was injured in the leg. Such incidents were not unusual, and they must have played their part in sharpening the prejudices which were held by many groups against the Irish in Manchester. Equally they must have also contributed to that feeling amongst the Irish that they were a separate community which the authorities viewed with suspicion and distrust.

Illicit distilling in England seems to have been confined to the larger towns, Manchester amongst them. Yet, unlike their colleagues in Ireland the English distillers sold substantially to chemists, hat-makers, french-polishers and other industrial users of spirit. The Methylated Spirit Act of 1855 cut off the illegal distiller's industrial trade by enabling industrial users to acquire, free of duty, spirit

mixed with wood naphtha. By 1870 the Commissioners of Inland Revenue were asserting that the practice of illicit distillation was nearly extinct in England and to have little subsequent revival. It would be interesting to know when the practice declined in Manchester, and the Irish and other imbibers were compelled to pay for their spirits, tax and all, over the bar of a fully licensed public house. Given the nature of the activity, doubts about whether the trade was brought to a complete end as rapidly as the authorities suggest should be encouraged. Perhaps some of the older members of Manchester's Irish community might be persuaded to say more on this fascinating aspect of Manchester's history of drink.

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