“WAR TIME HYSTERICS”?
ALCOHOL, WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF
WAR TIME SOCIAL PURITY IN ENGLAND

Stella Moss

Wartime hysterics gave currency to fabulous rumours. Stories ran rampant of drunkenness and depravity amongst the women of the masses.

Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Home Front: A Mirror to Life in England During the World War*

In May 1915 *The Times* reported on the number of women appearing in the capital’s courts on charges of drunkenness and disorderly conduct. Magistrate Clarke Hall, of the Old Street Police Court, was exasperated by the twenty-six women summoned before him one morning, declaring their behaviour to be “perfectly shocking”. Echoing his disquiet, the columnist added that at a “most critical time . . . these women might at least try to keep sober”.

This episode offers a telling insight into certain aspects of the representation of women’s drinking during the war. Subject to increased scrutiny, many female drinkers were stigmatised as social deviants, particularly by more reactionary social commentators. Yet there was also a sense that, for others, such disquiet was unwarranted and misplaced.

In exploring the manifold constructions of female liquor consumption, this chapter contributes to the historiographical debates over the impact of the war on women’s lives. Drawing on Margaret and Patrice Higonnet’s metaphor of the “double helix”, describing the ways in which women’s social positions both advanced and regressed during the war, this chapter illuminates the multiple and often contradictory discourses relating to female alcohol consumption, and its purported social significance. In many ways, women’s drinking was regulated and controlled to an unprecedented extent, both through legislative means and the inculcation of new social norms. Yet simultaneously there was a greater acceptance of female presence in the public house.

---

1 *The Times*, 19 May 1915, 5.
2 Higonnet and Higonnet (1987), pp. 31–47.
in communities across the country. While this trend predictably caused consternation among anti-drink campaigners, extensive government enquiries concluded that, although more women were entering public houses, fears about widespread inebriation were overplayed. In order to fully appreciate the significance of these various discourses, the chapter starts with an examination of the state’s general wartime controls. There follows an exposition of the multiple critiques of women’s wartime drinking, voiced by temperance reformers and social purity campaigners among others. Finally, the chapter looks at the government’s investigations into allegations of increasing female inebriation. The question of women’s drinking sheds new light on debates about wartime moral panic, demonstrating that, as with fears about soaring illegitimacy rates, claims of moral decay and social degeneration stemming from female inebriation were often widely overstated. Overall, concerns about women’s imbibing constituted one strand of a richly woven tapestry of social critique about the changing place of women in wartime civil society.

As household economist Constance Peel observed, alcohol regulation gave the government “much trouble” during the Great War. While politicians had long been mindful of the damaging effects of inebriation on both the individual and the wider community, the outbreak of hostilities saw an escalation of these concerns, together with a growing conviction that drunkenness posed an unnecessary threat to the war effort. Yet alcohol was to remain something of a double-edged sword, at least for some government departments, because of the considerable revenue levied from liquor duties which made a sizeable contribution to the Exchequer’s war chest. Wartime liquor regulation has received comparatively thorough analysis at the hands of scholars including Rose and Greenway. The historiographical preoccupation with state interference in the drink trade is perhaps the leading factor underpinning this trend, with accounts concentrating on the high politics of liquor legislation and on the issue of ‘national efficiency’. Little attention has been paid to the ramifications of regulation on gender relations, something which this chapter seeks to rectify. In doing so it focuses particularly on debates about working-class women and the public house.

---