

**WHAT PROHIBITION** will do for literature is a moot point in many minds, and the effects, now merely speculative, may be argued from the effects of wine upon letters. The old frenetic cry of "Wine, wine, red wine!" is seldom uttered to-day. "Authors of drinking-songs write self-consciously and often sullenly," says Mr. Solomon Eagle. He even sees a certain "defiance of the watching Puritan" in Mr. Belloc and Mr. Chesterton, who "when they sing of beer, are thinking not so much of beer as of the enemies of beer." Theirs is "not a contented hymn of praise, but a challenge." For—

"They denounce 'beverages' as heretical; they pillory the dyspeptic millionaire who commits all the heinous sins, but drinks lemonade they ask whether the grocer has ever been known to 'crack a bottle of fish sauce or stand a man a cheese, and they paint gloomily a world fast being overshadowed by the Moslem doctrine. We have gone further than that now, further than any place our ancestors dreamed of. Coleridge called Swift '*anima Rabelaisii habitans in sicco*' (the soul of Rabelais dwelling in a dry place); but the America of tomorrow would be a drier place for the soul of Rabelais than the body of any Swift. Canada also is 'involved.' From Baffin's Bay to the Rio Grande there will be (since we are mentioning Coleridge) 'water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink.' A year hence some ululating bard in a New York garret may be writing a farewell ode to the Last Cocktail."

"Solomon Eagle" is the capricious *causeur* in *The New Statesman*

(London) and can view [OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com) our plight with equanimity and what humor he chances to be master of. One thing he trusts to see develop is a difference among sociologists and doctors about the general effects of alcohol, "for when doctors disagree, honest men come by their own," and he goes on to produce some of the "evidential value" to be derived from literature:

"I am not thinking of the fact that a great deal of good literature has been produced—it is unscientific to blink the fact—under the influence of alcohol as under the influence of other drinks and drugs. Byron wrote some of his best work on gin and water, Coleridge on opium, and a modern of my acquaintance on strong cold tea, which he finds (taken seldom) clarifies his mind, excites his imagination, and doubles his energy. Those are facts; but the worst poison in the world might stimulate a man for a time, and facts on both sides have to be taken into account. Nor am I contending that so much good work has been done by drinkers

# The Literary View of Prohibition

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and about drink that drink is demonstrably good. What I am thinking about is the internal evidence that alcoholic literature affords as to the defects and merits of drink and the qualities of various sorts of drink.

"Let us take the second question first: I don't know why, but it is the custom if you wish to appeal a really serious arguer, like the men who write for the monthly reviews. He who surveys the literature of drink will find, I think, that certain drinks are glorified as boons to mankind, and that certain others are strangely ignored. Wine has been panegyricized in all climes and ages that have known it; the same can be said of beer. Brandy

and rum come a long way after; but they do appeal to writers of the more vociferous and piratical kind of literature. Whisky, however, and gin have never (outside the facetious writers of music-hall songs) had their celebrants. You can not imagine a man beginning with 'Plumpy Bacchus with pink eyne,' and (quite apart from the exigencies of rime) going on to belaud the jovial qualities of whisky; or a version of the old chorus which should run:

Back and side go bare, go bare,  
Both feet and hands go cold;  
But, belly, God send thee good gin enough—  
Whether it be new or old.

It may be that in Gaelic, for they have had this native liquor long in the Celtic countries, there is a song in praise of whisky, but in English (tho a large majority of our modern writers have probably drunk it daily) no praise of whisky, beyond the advertisement columns, exists."

Again Mr. Eagle goes to literature for an answer to the Prohibition contention that alcohol is on "precisely the same plane as noxious drugs":

"If this were so we should certainly find that, other things being equal, drinkers who



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have written about their drinking would have assumed the same attitude as druggers who have written about their drugging. But they never have. De Quincey wrote a panegyric of opium, but what he panegyricized he confessed to have been a subtle and delusive witch from whose snares he had with long and agonizing effort torn himself; Baudelaire and his circle sang of hashish, but only as the mother of illusions which hid a too horrible world and wore away a too tedious life. Inebriates exist; but the vast majority of drinkers are and have been moderate drinkers; and whatever the analysts and the timers of motions and reactions may say, it is indisputable that you may have to look a long way for confessions on these authors' parts that their potations have been mentally or physically bad for them. . . . .

"We may, therefore, take the evidence of literature, as far as it goes, as justification for a request to ardent prohibition advocates to—if they will pardon so profane a metaphor and so split an infinitive—draw it mild."