

# Put the kettle on? When tea drinkers were viewed as irresponsible as whiskey drinkers

December 4 2012

---

Poor women who drank tea were viewed as irresponsible as whisky drinkers in early 19th-century Ireland, new research by Durham University has unearthed.

Critics at the time declared that the practice of tea drinking – viewed as a harmless pastime in most past and present societies – was contributing to the stifling of Ireland's economic growth, and was clearly presented as reckless and uncontrollable.

Women who drank tea wasted their time and money, it was said, drawing them away from their duty to care for their husbands and home. It was felt this traditionally female responsibility was vital to progressing the [national economy](#).

Pamphlets published in England at the time suggest that the concerns about tea drinking were also felt widely outside Ireland. Some believed it threatened the wholesome diet of British peasants and symbolised damage to the social order and hierarchies.

According to the Durham University paper, published in the academic journal *Literature and History* today (5 Dec) and funded by the [Arts and Humanities](#) Research Council, reformers singled out tea drinking amongst peasant women as a practice which needed to be stamped out to improve the Irish economy and society.

Author Dr Helen O'Connell, Lecturer in English Studies at Durham

University, who analysed pamphlets and literature from that time, said: "Peasant women were condemned for putting their feet up with a cup of tea when they should be getting a hearty evening meal ready for their hard-working husbands.

"The reformers, who were middle to upper-class, were trying to get the peasant women to change their ways, albeit in a somewhat patronising way, for the greater good of the country.

"The reformers made it clear they saw tea-drinking as reckless and uncontrollable."

Pamphlets the reformers distributed to peasant households lambasted tea drinking as a luxury poor women could not afford and which could even cause addiction, illicit longing and revolutionary sympathies.

It was also said that [tea drinking](#) could even be akin to being a member of a secret society, a belief which heightened political anxieties at a time of counter revolution within the Union of Britain and Ireland.

English reformers were equally worried about sugar - tea was always sweetened then - and its connotations with slavery and the controversial plantations of the West Indies.

Dr Helen O'Connell said: "The prospect of poor peasant women squandering already scarce resources on fashionable commodities such as tea was a worry but it also implied that drinking tea could even express a form of revolutionary feminism for these women.

"If that wasn't enough, there were also supposedly drug-like qualities of tea, an exotic substance from China, which was understood to become addictive over time.

"It is unsurprising that tea consumption would generate considerable anxiety in Ireland in this period."

One pamphlet in 1811 by reformer and writer, Mary Leadbeater, tells the story of two female friends. Rose warns her friend Nancy that 'must not every poor man's wife work in and out of doors, and do all she can to help her husband? And do you think you can afford tea, on thirteen pence a day? Put that out of your head entirely, Nancy; give up the tea for good and all.'

## **Quotes from 'improvement pamphlets'**

### **Mary Leadbeater, The Landlord's Friend, 1813**

Lady Seraphine, the improving landowner, comments on the absence of tea cups in the kitchen of a peasant cabin, to which the woman of the house replies:

"We never were used to tea, and would not choose that our little girl should get a notion of any such thing. The hankering after a drop of tea keeps many poor all their lives. So I would not have any things in the cabin which would put us in mind of it."

### **Mary Leadbeater, Cottage Dialogues, 1811**

In response to her friend Nancy complaining about not being allowed a cup of tea by her mistress, her friend Rose replies:

"I think you are very much obliged to your mistress for not giving you such a bad fashion. What would you do in a house on your own? And you could not afford to drink [tea](#), and you would be hankering after it, when you got the way of it."

## Abigail Roberts, The Cottage Fireside, 1826

...you know Nanny will have it twice a day, if she can; and you are also to take into account the time spent about it. A poor person's time is his treasure; how much is lost at it- how much is lost running to the grocer's for it: and now you may see whether such a one as Nanny Ward is not able to beggar her family.

**More information:** 'A Raking Pot of Tea': Consumption and Excess in Early Nineteenth-Century Ireland, O'Connell, H, is published in Literature and History, 5 December 2012.

Provided by Durham University

Citation: Put the kettle on? When tea drinkers were viewed as irresponsible as whiskey drinkers (2012, December 4) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-12-kettle-tea-drinkers-viewed-irresponsible.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.