

ALCOHOL AND NATIONAL DETERIORATION.*

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MR. McADAM ECCLES asserts that he offers no apology for bringing forward a matter of individual and national importance. Truly none is needed, for he bases his paper upon the question of "efficiency" in the individual, and everyone will agree that a decline in the economic value of the individual is a matter which must be of serious importance to the State; especially is it so when this lowered efficiency can be altogether avoided. There is abundant proof—and this is one of the important conclusions of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration—that alcohol is a factor in causing a lowered vitality, diminished vigour, and enfeebled mental and bodily states. Alcohol has entered into the social life of the people to such an extent that the full strength of a scientific association such as the Society for the Study of Inebriety appears to be necessary to convince those who use it of its baneful effects. The isolated individual, to whatever profession he belongs, is by himself as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" about it. Alone he is too weak and insignificant to fight against the many interests involved in this great question, but combined together into a body such as is this Society, we hope, by drawing attention to the subject, to effect an improvement in the family and social life of our great cities in respect to the use and abuse of alcohol. It may not be generally known, but when the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration first sat, the author of the preceding paper, Mr. Eccles, summoned together at his house a number of medical men, among whom were the chairman and the secretary

* Remarks by Dr. Robert Jones upon Mr. W. McAdam Eccles' paper.

of the National Temperance League, the secretary, Dr. Kelynack, of the Society for the Study of Inebriety; Dr. Claude Taylor, the organizing secretary of a great deputation which has been received by Lord Londonderry in regard to the teaching of temperance and health in schools; also Dr. Shuttleworth, Sir Victor Horsley, Sir Thomas Barlow, and others. These eminent men met to consider what steps, if any, should be taken to place before the Inter-Departmental Committee evidence in regard to the deterioration caused by alcohol. There were two meetings, and it was finally decided to place some strong evidence of this before the Committee. It was pointed out that alcohol was harmful, and especially so to the growing tissues of the young; that it was most injurious in childhood; that it was the cause of over one-fifth of all insanity occurring among men in this country, and that it was possibly the direct cause of insanity in at least one, if not more, of every ten women admitted into asylums; that it was the cause of bad feeding, resulting in semi-starvation; that it caused mothers to neglect their children, fathers to neglect their homes, and that, in addition to the pernicious example to their children, it also resulted in lowered vitality and impaired physique in them; that, as a cause of poverty, it led to degraded surroundings, which again reacted upon the individual and drove him to more drink, thus causing a vicious circle, the full evil of which it was impossible to measure or to estimate. The report of the Inter-Departmental Committee most conclusively urged that definite action should be taken to bring before the people, more especially young people, the deleterious effects of alcoholic stimulants. To Mr. Eccles belongs the credit for doing what I must describe as a national service.

In regard to my own particular experience, it is a portentous fact that our lunatic asylums in London for maintenance alone cost the ratepayers over £2,000 per day, and that alcohol in its destructive effects upon the mind—which is the most highly-developed function of nervous matter—is a direct cause of much insanity. The human brain does not reach maturity until about the age of twenty-five years, and as it is the slowest growing of all the organs of the body, anything which retards its full development—and alcohol in youth is proved to do so—affects the efficiency of the individual among his peers. There is no doubt that opportunity to get drink has much to do with its consumption—"the

means to do ill deeds makes ill deeds done"—and the greater the number of public-houses in the neighbourhood, the more chance there is for access to drink and the more there is consumed. The Licensing Commission recommended a maximum of one public-house to every 700 inhabitants, but in my county, Essex, there is a public-house to every 330 persons. As to heredity, it has been experimentally proved by Dr. G. F. Watson in guinea-pigs that the effects of poisons upon the parent, especially through the mother, are, without any doubt, communicated to the offspring; and *a fortiori* must this be the case in respect to the action of alcohol through the human mother, whose offspring takes so much longer to reach maturity and to attain its own measure of perfection; any harmful influence acting upon tissues growing during so long a period must be most prejudicial. Also, as Mr. Eccles has reminded us in his paper, insurance statistics are incomparably more favourable in regard to the duration of life to the abstainer than to the non-abstainer.

How are we to act for the best in the way of prevention? I think if it were considered "bad form" to drink, if a feeling among the people themselves were engendered that to be drunk was a disgrace, that the "Black List" was not a police or a magisterial affair, but that it was an injury to the highest moral sense and self-respect of the people, and if public opinion were to support this view, then intoxication would be considered a vice, a sin, and a crime against its best traditions, not only against the person himself, but also against his family and the State. In this way we might enjoy greater immunity against the evil consequences of a habit which appears to have taken so firm a hold upon the people. To establish this popular "Black List" should not be beyond the efforts of such a society as ours, and in my opinion one of the best methods to obtain this end will be by teaching the young the evil effects, and even probably the physiological effects, of alcohol upon the mind and body. We should urge this not only upon the parents, but it should be instilled as a part of the mental discipline of the children in all of our elementary schools.

I consider that Mr. Eccles has done great service to this cause by bringing his paper before the Society in so eminently practical a manner.