

Journal Information

Journal ID (publisher-id): jgi

ISSN: 1910-7595

Publisher: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Article Information

© 1999-2006 The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Received Day: 5 Month: July Year: 2006

Publication date: August 2006

Publisher Id: jgi.2006.17.9

DOI: 10.4309/jgi.2006.17.9

Gambling in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel: “A Leprosy is o'er the Land”

For correspondence: Nigel E. Turner, PhD, Scientist, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 33 Russell Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2S1. Phone: 416-535-8501, ext. 6063, fax: 416-595-6899, e-mail: Nigel_Turner@camh.net

Competing interests: None declared. NT claims no conflict of interest in writing this review and states that he does not work for the gambling industry.

Nigel E. Turner is by training a cognitive research psychologist and has had a long-term involvement in numerous gambling studies. He is particularly interested in gambling systems and the experience of gambling. He is working towards an integrative model of the psychology, biology, and sociology of pathological gambling. He has a keen interest in history and as a hobby participates in historical re-enactments of the War of 1812.

By Michael Flavin. (2003). Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 254 pp., ISBN 1-903900-18-2 (hardcover). Price (approx.): CA\$78 or US\$70.

Thou knowest, Lord, the fell disease.
Has Smitten myriads, rich and poor;
The workman's hour, the wealth of ease
Are squandered for the gambler's store.
Palace and cottage, works and mart
Are suffering from the fatal bane;
Prison, asylum, refuge, home,
Are peopled with the victims slain.

“A Leprosy is o'er the Land”: Winner of The National Anti-Gambling League's hymn-writing competition, 1905 (pp. 222–223).

According to Michael Flavin, gambling was so widespread in England during the 19th century that it was considered to be the most prevalent vice of the age—a leprosy over the land. In *Gambling in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*, Flavin examines the attitudes towards gambling shown in the novels of seven prominent English writers: Disraeli, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, Hardy, Trollope, and Moore. His examination of the content of these novels is interlaced with an examination of major historical events that shaped these views and legislation that attempted to curtail gambling throughout this period. For example, excessive gambling during the Regency period (1811 to 1820) created a strong negative reaction against gambling during the middle part of the century.

The consensus of most of the novels examined in this book is that gambling is harmful to society. Patrons of betting shops were viewed as being driven to insanity, theft, and even suicide. A strong link is also drawn between gambling and crime. To partake of one vice was to be lured into other vices. Gamblers in these novels have little self-control. Gambling was also seen as a contamination. As a result, Trollope was concerned about how people of lower classes were allowed to mix with people of higher classes at racetracks.

Attitudes were not universally negative. Dickens, for example, is characterized as advocating control rather than abolition. George Moore appeared to have negative views of gambling in most of his novels, but in his *Ester Waters* he presents a sympathetic characterization of a bookie, driven to his death by unfair regulation of gambling. In addition, one of the main characters in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (Rawdon Crawley) makes his living for a short while as a professional gambler.

Several of these 19th-century English novelists appeared to be aware of the addictive or disease nature of pathological gambling. Some of the stories are sympathetic towards the entrapment that comes with a mania to gamble. There was also an awareness of escape as a motive for gambling and the erroneous beliefs about winning that often accompany the disorder. In addition, the links between gambling and alcoholism, and gambling and suicide, were apparently well known in this period. However, according to Flavin these images are excessively negative. They most often show gambling as a means to financial and personal ruin rather than as a normal recreational activity. For Flavin the authors fail to appreciate the idea that for most people gambling was an affordable hobby.

The moral crusade against gambling emerged and became increasingly vocal as the century progressed. English novelists tended to be middle class. At the time gambling was most popular amongst the aristocracy and the working classes. This situation left “a self congratulatory middle class to claim moral authority” (p. 58). On

the one hand, industrialists worried that gambling would undermine their profit margin by “fostering habits and methods absolutely antagonistic to national progress” (p. 59). On the other hand, middle-class reformers and leaders of labour movements saw gambling as parasitic upon the poor, who lacked self-discipline. In gambling legislation there was a clear double standard. “Common” gaming houses were banned, but exclusive gaming clubs and racetracks (the sport of kings) were allowed to continue. One of the more interesting observations in the book is the idea that the attempt to stamp out gambling among the working class led to an increase in alcohol consumption. Flavin concludes that both right- and left-wing commentators failed to appreciate the fact that for most people in the 19th century gambling was a hobby, not leprosy.

I have three main criticisms of the book. First, in the conclusion he appears to criticise 19th century English writers for exaggerating the negative aspects of gambling. However, a novelist is under no obligation to be accurate when portraying gambling and society. In many cases the characters' problems with gambling create a crisis that makes the story interesting. If the *Young Duke* in Disraeli's novel of the same name, or Nell's grandfather in the Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop* could control their gambling, there would not be much of a story to tell. Furthermore, even if most people gamble non-problematically, stories about the consequences of excessive gambling were an important topic for discussion. Second, the book fails to connect with modern gambling research literature. It could have been enriched by an examination of the extent to which the images of gambling (both nonproblem and problem) are consistent with what we know today about gambling. Third, Flavin explains the negative view of gambling in terms of the middle class's sense of moral superiority. He does not consider the extent to which the consequences of excessive gambling may have contributed to the negative attitude towards gambling expressed by these writers. Nonetheless, the book is a fascinating examination of gambling in 19th century English literature and makes an important contribution to our understanding of the history of gambling.

Article Categories:

- reviews
 - book review