THE ETIOLOGY OF CHRONIC ALCOHOLISM*

A Résumé of the Literature with Two Case Reports

BY JOHN L. SMALLDON, M. D.,
SENIOR ASSISTANT PHYSICIAN, HUDSON RIVER STATE HOSPITAL, POUGHKEEPSIE, N. Y.

In the controversies of recent years, it has often been said, or implied, that alcoholism is a recently developed problem, a resultant of conflicts produced by a complex modern civilization. In contrast to that viewpoint, it is found that alcohol has been used to excess by man throughout his history. Many references to inebriety, for instance those of Noah and Aaron in the Bible, are contained in early literature. In this connection, the contention of G. Archdall Reid¹ that certain races are alcoholic or temperate as a result of a process of evolution is interesting. He postulates that Jews are rarely chronically alcoholic today because they drank heavily at an earlier period and have become temperate in proportion to their past sufferings from alcohol. Horatio M. Pollock,² director of mental hygiene statistics, New York State Department of Mental Hygiene, in a study of alcoholic mental disease admissions to the New York State Hospitals in 1930, and to similar hospitals throughout the United States, as determined from the Federal Census Bureau's reports for 1922, corroborates the statement that Jews are rarely chronically alcoholic. At least, he finds that alcoholic mental disease is very rare among that race. Again, the South European wine countries have been said to be the most temperate in the world while savages lacking the opportunity to drink in the past are known extremists in the use of alcohol. In the above-mentioned study by Pollock,² it was noted that in 1929-31 the rate of alcoholic mental disease admissions of negroes to the New York State hospitals was twice that among the foreign-born whites and nearly five times as high as that among the native whites. As opposed to the low rate among Jews, the same authority found a high rate of alcoholic mental disease in Irish and Slavonic, and to a somewhat lesser extent in English, German, Italian and Russian immigrants to this country. Such disease was noted to be more

*Read before the Dutchess County Psychiatric Society, Poughkeepsie, N. Y., in abstracted form, February 16, 1933.
prevalent in our foreign-born white inhabitants than among our native whites by a ratio of over two to one. Pollock, 2 and also Adolf Meyer, 3 attribute the differences in racial susceptibility to their unlike social habits, it being pointed out that Jews are by no means immune to mental disorders.

The importance of our modern problem is emphasized by the following statement of Forel. 4 "In all countries where the alcoholic habit reigns, it accounts for from one-half to three-fourths of the crimes, a great share of suicides, of mental disorders, of deaths, of diseases generally, of poverty, of vulgar depravity, of sexual excesses and venereal diseases, and of dissolution of families." "In 15 large cities of Switzerland, one-third of the male suicides and one-tenth of the deaths in men above 20 years are wholly or essentially referable to alcohol." In considering the foregoing however, it should be stated that Herman Adler, 5 in a recent review of the subject, found that the assumption of a specific relationship of alcohol to crime lacks trustworthy evidence. He explains that social behavior is "a complicated reaction between the human being and his environment," a delicate balance which may be upset in many ways, depending upon a great number of coincidences. In concluding his review, Dr. Adler 5 writes as follows. "Under such conditions, it is, of course, clear that any chemical re-agent which disturbs the smooth functioning of the organism may produce situations from which a criminal act may result. It is this disturbance of functioning so commonly associated with alcohol which has perhaps contributed more than anything else to the widespread belief that alcohol is one of the great causes of crime." The statement of William A. White 6 that about 12 per cent of the insane in the mental institutions of the United States are there because of alcohol, directly or indirectly, is worthy of note. Statistics of the New York State hospitals for the period 1909-1931, as given by Pollock, 2 serve to further emphasize the alcoholic problem. First admissions of alcoholic mental disease were found to have varied from 9.4 to 10.8 per cent of all first admissions from 1909 to 1913, and then to have dropped to 7.4 per cent, 5.6 per cent and 6.1 per cent in 1914, 1915 and 1916. In 1917, a reaction believed by Pollock 2 to have been due to the country's entrance into