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The Early History of Coffee Houses in England

Coffee houses played an important role in the cultural and intellectual history of the seventeenth century. Functioning as venues where people could meet, catch up with news, transact business and discuss issues of mutual concern, they provided a valuable alternative to public houses: the absence of alcohol allowed for more serious conversation. First published in 1893, this illustrated study by Edward Forbes Robinson (*fl.*1890) explores the history of the English coffee house and its role in seventeenth-century social and political life. Beginning with a history of coffee itself, Robinson examines the religious traditions surrounding the beverage, moving on to discuss its medical uses and the clientele who frequented the establishments that served it. The role of the coffee house as a temperance institution is also considered. With an appendix containing a selection of contemporary texts and descriptions of coffee house tokens, this lively study remains significant to social historians.

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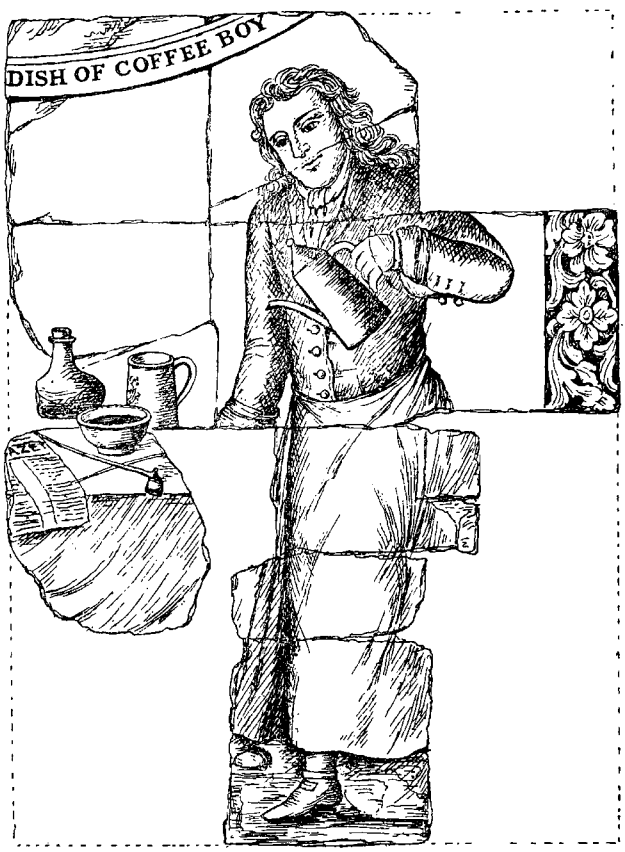
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COFFEE HOUSE TILES. (*From Spitalfields.*)

See App. G.

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THE EARLY HISTORY

OF

COFFEE HOUSES IN ENGLAND

WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST USE OF COFFEE
AND A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE SUBJECT

BY

EDWARD FORBES ROBINSON, B.A.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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PATERNOSTER HOUSE, CHARING CROSS ROAD
1893

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"The history of coffee houses, ere the invention of clubs, was that of the manners, the morals, and the politics of a people."—*Isaac D'Israeli.*

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Dedicated

TO

MY SISTER FLORENCE

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PREFACE.

THE object of this book is to trace the origin of the English Coffee House system, and to describe its part in the social and political life of the seventeenth century.

To the general reader this subject will prove interesting chiefly on account of the glimpse which it affords into the condition of the common people at a critical moment in our national history. Against the misgovernment of the later Stuarts all opposition seemed in vain. The tactics of Parliamentary parties were frustrated, concessions and schemes of reconciliation proved abortive, the Press was no longer a bulwark of public liberty; and, as if the country had grown weary of battling for freedom, the very municipalities were voluntarily surrendering their privileges. Great changes in our constitution were inevitable. That those changes were in the direction of progress, and that they took place in time to preserve much of the old order, was due in part to the fact that the

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popular voice found an unlooked-for means of utterance. The Coffee House Club, though of Eastern origin, adapted itself to English social traditions and assimilated some of the best elements of Puritanism. Thus invigorated its influence began to be felt when more ancient institutions seemed temporarily paralyzed.

Only one feature of the new institution need here be insisted upon. The Coffee Houses were without any regular organization. They were used for a hundred purposes besides that of political debate, and were frequented by almost every class in society. Merchants pursuing their business, those who were in need of refreshment, and loungers of every description, resorted hither continually. Literary critics made certain of these places their haunts; learned and scientific subjects were discussed; and yet more often persons were to be found here eagerly inquiring about the gaieties of the town and latest productions at the theatre.

At first this want of combination, as well as their simplicity and homeliness, caused the influence of the Coffee Houses to be undervalued, and when their importance could no longer be ignored they were still curiously misunderstood. Both the

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Government and its opponents suspected that some secret connection existed, and that they were the scenes of a plot deeply ramified and mysterious in its working. Yet it was the plain fact of their being in touch with the daily life of the average Londoner which gave them their magical power.

The first three chapters of this book are intended as an introduction to those which follow. The stern Mohammedan persecution, of which they give an account, has not indeed been paralleled in Christian countries. Yet the religious zeal which sought to read the word "coffee" into passages of the Koran, may be compared with similar attempts to prove the antiquity of the berry by supposed references in the Classics and the Bible. The stories of the political troubles in East and West are alike up to a certain point; our English rulers copied the despotic action of the Turkish Sultan, though with a wholly unexpected result.

The fourth chapter is concerned with the medical history of our subject. We see there how a mistake on the part of Arab physicians originated the prejudice by which coffee was long regarded in England and France as a powerful drug, rather than a simple and a refreshing beverage.

In another important respect the first thirty

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pages differ from the rest of the book. Whilst attempting to correct and arrange the early legends and monastic traditions, I have been content to receive information concerning these at second-hand through such English and French translations as were available.

On the other hand, in dealing with the English Coffee Houses, I have spared no pains in verifying statements which are often quoted in magazine articles and elsewhere without reference to the originals.

As an example of the method adopted, I would draw attention to the descriptions of the earliest Oxford Coffee Club and of the Turk's Head "Rota," contained in the fifth chapter. I have there traced the close connection which existed, according to the evidence of Anthony à Wood, between the beginnings of the Royal Society and the company that met at the house of Tillyard. I have likewise tried to show that the London "Rota" was, for a moment, of supreme political importance. However, in both instances, it has been my primary intention to describe vividly and with accuracy the society that met at these places; in the latter case I have introduced the reader, as it were personally, to such sociable characters as

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Samuel Pepys and the brave but unfortunate Harrington.

A constant frequenter of Coffee Houses—and one whose name deserves to be rescued from oblivion—was "Master Harry Blunt." His character seemed to contain in miniature stern Puritan elements together with those more genial qualities which rendered the Coffee Houses popular.

Lastly, I have investigated the hitherto neglected claim of the early Coffee House to be considered as a Temperance institution. In order that such descriptions as I have given may not appear exaggerated, it is well to bear in mind that the terms used of the Coffee Houses during the time that Dryden bore rule at Will's are not equally applicable at a later date. The institution was complete, and its distinctive features were already becoming obscured, at a time when particular establishments, such as St. James's and the Bedford, were still increasing in fashionable repute. We are concerned only with the earlier period before the name of Coffee House had become a misnomer, before it had lost anything of its generous social traditions, and whilst the issue of the struggle for political liberty was as yet uncertain.

In the course of my inquiries there has been

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occasion to refer to contemporary evidence of all kinds. Newspaper advertisements, reports of trials during the season of the "Popish Plots," Admiralty and Domestic State Papers, including verification of particular points by reference to the original manuscripts, and the important results of the MSS. Commission, have proved as fertile in information as the few treatises professedly dealing with our subject. The early broadsides and pamphlets—a sufficiently numerous class—have received special attention. They are for the most part quoted in the body of the book, and the Bibliography at the end contains a complete list in chronological order. In cases of special interest—e.g. the "Character" of 1665, and some details concerning the "Rota"—and with a view to diminishing the number of the footnotes, it has seemed best to throw into an Appendix extracts that were otherwise too long for quotation.

It only remains to express my hearty thanks for help received.

From the Committee of the Guildhall Library I have obtained permission to procure copies of their valuable collection of Tokens, as well as of the unique Coffee House tiling (a beautiful specimen of seventeenth century workmanship) in the Museum

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of the Guildhall. The list of Tokens in the Appendix I owe to the courtesy of E. M. Borrajo, Esq., of the Guildhall Library.

I would especially mention the kindness of the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, in permitting free access to an interesting collection of pamphlets and engravings in her possession.

My thanks are due to J. Macfarlane, Esq., of the British Museum, for no small amount of help in the matter of revision; and to him I am also indebted for having drawn my attention to valuable sources of information.

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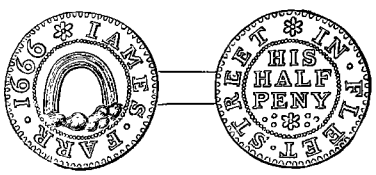
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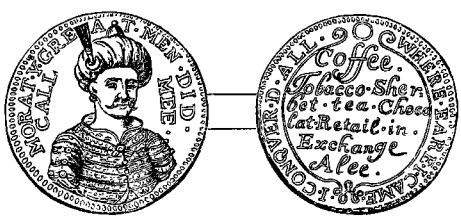
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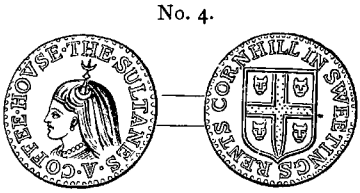
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