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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Ned Ward

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Abstract

Edward ‘Ned’ Ward was a satirist and tavern keeper active in early eighteenth-century London, best known for his *London Spy* (1698-1701) – a walkabout tour of the metropolis that typified his hearty comic style and eye for graphic detail. For the history of sociability, his works offer vivid contemporary representations of meeting and mixing among both the high-life and low. He was also known to enjoy a tipples himself with fellow satirists in the taverns of the town, reading and writing in company. Taken together, Ward’s life and works are a reminder that the ideal of polite and decorous sociability was not one to which everyone subscribed.

Edward ‘Ned’ Ward was a satirist and [tavern](#) keeper, most widely recognised as the author of *The London Spy* (1698-1700) – an eighteen-part walkabout tour of the metropolis that exemplified his hearty comic style and eye for graphic detail. His career coincided with a period of intensification in printing and bookselling in the British Isles after press licensing laws lapsed for a final time in 1695. He sought to capitalise on the industry’s expansion by writing for print and, with over 100 titles to his name – penned over four decades – he was among the most industrious authors of his generation. His subject matter comprised a host of contemporary interests and concerns, as well as the everyday sights, sounds and smells of life in early eighteenth-century Britain (and occasionally further afield). His publications offer a startlingly intricate portrait of his times – covering anything from politics to prostitution; fashionable wigs to food – and they have accordingly been mined by historians with diverse scholarly interests. For the history of sociability, Ward’s published writings offer rich material, with satirical representations of diverse forms of meeting and mixing on the streets, at fairs, and in parks, taverns and [coffeehouses](#). He wrote to entertain, and satirical exaggeration was germane to the endeavour, but his humour nevertheless rested on common reference points and lampooning the familiar: it thus offers a valuable contemporary perspective. Furthermore, since Ward’s publications were often designed to be enjoyed in convivial company – and he was known to enjoy a tipples himself – he also offers a glimpse of sociability centring on printed texts and the exercise of wit, fuelled by the consumption of alcohol in the period’s public houses. Taken together, Ward’s life and works are a reminder that the ideal of polite and decorous sociability was not one to which everyone subscribed.

Despite Ward’s prominence in historians’ footnotes, he has remained an elusive figure. The only book length study was published in 1946 and its author, Howard William Troyer, focused primarily on Ward’s published works; uncovering his subject’s ‘life and activities’, he wrote, constituted ‘a definite problem’.¹ Ward’s early life is still the most obscure. The scraps of evidence available suggest that he was born in Leicestershire in November 1666 and received an education typical of a boy of the middling sort, attending a local grammar school but not proceeding to university. He moved to London in his twenties and there set about writing for print. He was unsupported by patrons, preferring, as he put it, ‘the certain fruits of a constant Industry’ to ‘the hope of climbing up a Golden Mountain, by the help of Powerful Friends’.² He produced works that would appeal to the reading public and, he hoped, sell in the bookshops. Indeed, he explicitly acknowledged his commercial aims by playfully likening his career to that of a ‘Strumpet’: both working ‘to supply our Necessities’ and celebrated chiefly for ‘the knack of Pleasing’.³ He was extraordinarily prolific to this end. The number of individual titles ran to 111, but his publishing activity was still more energetic, with several editions of more popular works, plus multi-volume serials, and miscellanies and collections brimming with shorter poems, skits and squibs. Even so, Ward illustrates the difficulty of eking out a living from the pen. In 1706 he was convicted of seditious libel for sections of his six-part serial, *Hudibras Redivivus; or a Burlesque Poem on the Times* (1705-6) and, by this time, he had also attained patriarchal responsibilities of marriage, children, and household ownership. He was forced to supplement his income through the victualing trade: in 1712 he opened an alehouse in Clerkenwell Green; five years later he relocated to Moorfields, where he ran a tavern until 1728 when he moved again, this time to open a

coffeehouse on an alley running between Holborn and the entrance to Gray's Inn. It was here that he died in June 1731. Despite achieving fame and success in his lifetime, Ward's prolific writing and commercial aims drew the scorn of some, not least [Alexander Pope](#) who included Ward among the literary 'dunces' in his *Dunciad* (1728) – thus helping to secure Ward's lasting reputation as a quintessential Grub-Street hack, with all the vulgar connotations that implies.

In recent years, however, the call to re-evaluate Ward and his writing is growing louder, as scholars recognise his value to studies of 'ordinary' life, culture, and 'popular' print.⁴ His work dwells on the everyday – people, places, happenings – and its quirks, foibles and minutiae. He never flinched from the unlovely aspects of life, indeed his writing gains comic energy from undercutting polite ideals. Whether he was writing about Bath, Tunbridge Wells, or (the subject that detained his attention most) London, Ward revelled in grubby details that were screened out of politer representations of city living. There is no better example across his works than the *London Spy*. The narrative is written in the first person, where 'I' is the Spy – a one-time country scholar who sets off in search of adventure in the capital. On arrival, he happens upon an old friend, now a London local, who resolves to take him on a tour. The pair traverse the city on foot, from Westminster to Wapping, taking in all the metropolis affords. They visit many of London's landmarks – St Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London, Westminster Hall – but the central focus is Londoners themselves, together with their habits, forms of [dress](#), speech and interaction. Nor are these static or abstracted character profiles; rather, the Spy relates dynamic encounters with those he meets, presenting a vivid portrait of sociability among both the high-life and the low.

As the Spy promenades through [St James's](#) Park, he observes 'Court ladies' as they 'raise their extended limbs from their downy couches, and walk into the Mall to refresh their charming bodies with the cooling and salubrious breezes'. Their 'majestic deportment' is juxtaposed with the fawning gentlemen they attract – with such 'sheepish humility' these 'cringing worshippers' appeared as though the 'world was turned topsy-turvy'.⁵ In another issue, the Spy retires to a nearby [coffeehouse](#) bristling with fops chewing over matters political. These 'beau-politicians' were 'a very gaudy crowd of odiferous Tom-essences' and their chief occupation was snuffing tobacco while 'walking backwards and forwards with their hats in their hands, not daring to convert 'em to their intended use, lest it should put the foretops of their wigs into some disorder'. Salutations were offered as 'Bows and cringes of the newest mode were exchanged', until the Spy caused a ruckus by irreverently lighting up a pipe and puffing smoke about the room (Hyland 154-6). The capital's less salubrious spaces of public sociability are also given due attention. In one issue, the Spy visits a Billingsgate alehouse. Once inside the 'smoky boozing-ken', he meets a gaggle of fishwives making merry over the business of the day: they were a 'tattered assembly of motherly flat-caps' whose voices were 'as loud as a temple horn'; each one clutching 'her nipperkin of warm ale and brandy'. In one corner sat 'a couple of brawny watermen'; in another, sailors traded tales of their travels – of places so hot they could fry beef on deck, or so cold, they boasted, it had 'frozen our words in our mouths' (Hyland 39-44). Elsewhere in the serial, the Spy weaves his way through the throng at Billingsgate Market; he moves among the crowds Bartholomew Fair and the romping hordes at the Lord Mayor's Parade; and he enjoys a memorable back-and-forth with the infamously mouthy Thames watermen. In each case, it is the Spy's

encounters with Londoners that enliven the accounts – it was a characteristic focus on interaction that can be found across his other London works.⁶

Ward's attention to sociability, however, is perhaps explicit in his *Secret History of Clubs* (1709). Peter Clark has shown that the decades after 1688 witnessed a 'national expansion' in clubs, as people banded together in search of association and friendly social interaction.⁷ By the 1720s, one-time-spy turned travel writer, John Macky, described London as having 'an infinity of clubs or societies for the improvement of learning and keeping up with good humour and mirth'.⁸ Ward's satire skewers this fashion, with almost four hundred pages detailing thirty-two clubs and their chief activities. Clubs pretended to improvement, but for Ward 'the general End thereof, is a Promiscuous Encouragement of Vice, Faction, and Folly'.⁹ He thus sets about a lively account of each. Some are real societies, such as the [Kit-Kat](#) and Beef-Steak clubs, and a lesser-known gathering – the 'Small Coal-Man's Music Club' – which was hosted by coal-merchant and concert promoter, Thomas Britton (1644-1714), above his shop, next-door to Ward's Clerkenwell alehouse. There are also clubs that elaborated upon real forms of interaction, such as 'the Mollies Club', which satirised meeting places frequented by those seeking male homosexual encounters. The majority of clubs, however, are fictitious and lampooned certain kinds of Londoners and their interactions with one another. There is the Beaus Club; the Club of Market Women and that of Thieves; 'Sam Scott's Smoaking Club'; the Beggars' Club, and many more, including the 'Farting Club', which allowed Ward to exercise his scatological flair. The text is playful in tone, but it nevertheless affords an animated portrait of sociability in the capital.

Ward's publications offer abundant representations of sociability. Approached differently, however, they also testify to forms of social interaction in which printed texts were written and read. Ward produced several miscellanies – a genre of text that offers clues to sociable authorship and the collective consumption of texts.¹⁰ He contributed to *The Diverting Muse, or, Universal Medley* (1707), for example, which cheerfully claimed to have been 'written by a society of merry gentlemen, for the entertainment of the town'. The contents also suggest that its anticipated audience was a collective one. The use of the plural in 'A drinking song' is instructive:

Then fill about
And when its out
Our Measure let us double,
He's only blest
That drinks the best,
And gives himself least Trouble.

Similarly, 'A new litany for a merry society over a glass of good liquor' included the collective refrain 'Libera nos domine', as participants prayed to be delivered from various everyday irritations.¹¹ Ward's works catered for a context in which reading was frequently a social activity, and the experience of print a communal one.¹² His verse is peppered with comic half-rhymes, the full effects of which are only realised when read aloud. One of his

political satires, *The Galloper* (1710), even noted in the preface that ‘the Terminations of the Verse’ are ‘such as measure no otherwise in common Pronunciation’ in hopes to ‘render it diverting’. And the poem concluded with drinking a health to the Queen – another common characteristic of Ward’s publications that indicates their sociable consumption.¹³ Moreover, Ward undoubtedly practised this kind of sociability himself. Not only did he ply a simultaneous career as a licenced victualler, but he was also partial to a convivial encounter. His *Vade Mecum for Malt Worms; or a Guide to Good Fellows* (1720) catalogued public houses across the length and breadth of the capital, displaying an encyclopaedic knowledge of London’s [taverns](#) and alehouses. Elsewhere, Ward also acknowledged that:

As Times go, I think it no great Crime to own, that now and then, when Business will permit, I love a chiruping Glass, in the Company of such Friends to whom my own may be acceptable.¹⁴

Little wonder that several of Ward’s known associates were fellow satirical authors with a reputation for hard drinking. Tom Brown (1663-1704) was characterised by his early twentieth century biographer as falling somewhere between ‘a lively wit’ and a ‘social liability’, while William Pittis (1673-1721) was dismissed by the bookseller John Dunton as ‘a drunken sot’, whose ‘brains are in a perpetual source-tub’.¹⁵ The orthodox narrative for the early eighteenth century is one of a ‘reformation of manners’, manifested in rising politeness, moderation and sobriety, particularly associated with the gentlemanly class.¹⁶ Yet, Ward’s works and his sociable habits are a reminder of the extent to which impolite forms of sociability persisted – and were celebrated – alongside the drive for decorous behaviour.¹⁷

The first historian to draw upon Ward’s publications as source material was T.B. Macaulay in his *History of England*, though he excused himself with a footnote admitting that he was ‘almost ashamed to quote such nauseous balderdash’.¹⁸ The development of social and cultural history in the later twentieth century, together with corresponding transformations in literary scholarship, however, has brought about a re-evaluation of Ward and his works. Today, his extensive output stands as an important body of source material for eighteenth-century scholars with diverse interests – the history of sociability included.

1. Howard William Troyer, *Ned Ward of Grubstreet* (Cambridge, MA, 1946), p. 3.
2. Ned Ward, *The Fourth Volume of the Writings of the Author of the London Spy* (London, 1709), preface.
3. Ned Ward, *A Trip to Jamaica* (London, 1698), ‘To the Reader’.
4. Peter M. Briggs, ‘Satiric Strategy in Ned Ward’s London Writings’, *Eighteenth-Century Life* 35, 2 (2011).
5. Paul Hyland (ed.), *The London Spy: Ned Ward’s Classic Account of Underworld Life in Eighteenth-Century London*, (East Lansing, 1993), p. 135-7.
6. See, for example, Ned Ward, *A Frolick to Horn-Fair* (London, 1700); Ned Ward, *Three Nights Adventures; or the Rambling Rakes* (London, 1701); Ned Ward, *The Delights of the Bottle* (London, 1720)
7. Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1500-1800: the Origin of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), p. 60-93
8. John Macky, *A Journey through England*, (London, 1724), p. 259.

9. Ned Ward, *The Secret history of Clubs* (London, 1709), p. 1.
 10. Adam Smyth, "Profit and delight": Printed Miscellanies in England, 1640-1682 (Detroit, 2004).
 11. *The Diverting Muse, or Universal Medley* (London 1707), p. 202-203.
 12. Jonathan Barry, 'Literacy and literature in popular culture: reading and writing in historical perspective' in Tim Harris (ed.), *Popular culture in England, c. 1500-1850* (London, 1995), p. 69-94.
 13. Ned Ward, *The Galloper* (London, 1710).
 14. Ned Ward, *Wine and Wisdom: or, the Tipling Philosophers* (London, 1710), preface.
 15. Benjamin Boyce, *Tom Brown of facetious memory: Grub Street in the age of Dryden* (Cambridge, MA, 1939), p. 4; John Dunton, *The Life and Errors of John Dunton* (London, 1705), I, p. 450-3.
 16. Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain 1660-1800* (Harlow, 2001).
 17. Kate Davison, 'Occasional Politeness and Gentlemen's Laughter in 18th Century England', *The Historical Journal*, 57, 4 (2014), p. 921-45.
 18. Charles Harding Firth (ed.), *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second by Lord Macaulay*, 6 vols (London, 1913) I, p. 340. Charles Harding Firth (ed.), *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second by Lord Macaulay*, 6 vols (London, 1913) I, p. 340.
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Further Reading

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[The London-Spy \(1699\)](#)

[The London Spy \(1703\)](#)

[Ned Ward on the Kit-Cat Club \(1709\)](#)

[The Secret History of Clubs, 1709](#)