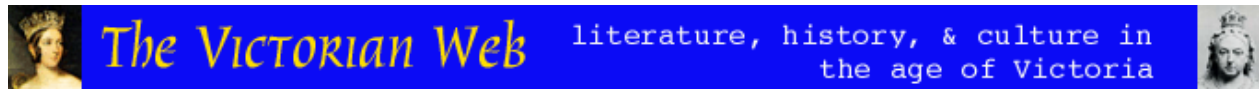


The Medicinal Use of Opium in England

George P. Landow, Professor of English and the History of Art, Brown University, with Philip V. Allingham, Contributing Editor, *Victorian Web*; Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario



[[Victorian Web Home](#) → [Victorian Political History](#) → [Victorian Social History](#) → [The British Empire](#) → [Opium Wars](#)]

Like many addictive substances that later turned out to have disastrous political social, economic, and political effects, opium was first believed by many to be a medical miracle, after which it became what today we call a recreational drug and wreaked havoc in many people lives. It followed the same pattern, in other words, as heroin, morphine, and cocaine, each of which was at first regarded as a harmless drug useful in the relief of pain. It requires an act of historical imagination to understand why such powerful substances gained ready acceptance. Place yourselves, therefore, in a time before the germ theory of disease had been formulated, and therefore also before the development of sulfonamides and antibiotics that could cure the illnesses produced by such organisms. As Peter Ward Fay notes:

It was tincture of opium that the druggist handed [De Quincey](#) when the latter tried to get relief from the neuralgic pains of the head and face that were torturing him. [Coleridge](#) began taking laudanum (camphorated tincture of opium) about the same time and for much the same reason. At that moment in [[George Eliot's](#)] [Middlemarch](#) when his tormentor Raffles lies dying, it is an "almost empty opium phial" that Bulstrode puts out of sight lest Lydgate discover that his patient has been given an overdose. Opium, not its alkaloids, was the essential ingredient in the innumerable remedies dispensed in Europe and America for the treatment of diarrhea, dysentery, asthma, rheumatism, diabetes, malaria, cholera, fevers, bronchitis, insomnia, and pains of any sort. *At a time when the physician's cabinet was almost bare of alternative drugs, it was impossible to practice medicine without it.* [6; emphasis added]

For decades opium and related substances, such as laudanum, found wide acceptance, and it was used with often fatal results to [calm infants](#) in that form of Victorian day care known as baby farms. According to Anthony S. Wohl, malnutrition rather than overdose killed children: the opiates reduced their appetites so drastically that they refused to eat. (Sarah Water's *Fingersmith* [2002], a novel set in Victorian times, provides a powerful picture of such baby-farms and the baby-minders who ran them.)

Modern western societies, it is often claimed, make excessive use of tranquilizing, mood-elevating, and other psychotropic medications, and such may be the case. It is important to realize, however, that before the appearance of the Food and Drug Administration in the United States and similar regulatory government agencies in Europe and the UK, a great many respectable people imbibed narcotics and alcohol in the form of patent medicines and even soft drinks. Coca Cola, after all, has its name because once upon a time it contained a minute amount of cocaine, which was thought to be a healthy stimulant (!), and many teetotaling women relied on daily doses of tonics that, unknown to them, contained as much alcohol as whiskey or gin.

References

Fay, Peter Ward. *The Opium War 1840-1842*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.

Wohl, Anthony S. *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983. pp. 34-35.





Last modified 23 June 2006