

# Sugar

LAURA EASTLAKE 

Edge Hill University, United Kingdom

**S**UGAR is in the bloodstream of our modern world. We crave it as a treat and fear it as an increasingly urgent health risk. Although sugar had been used for centuries in small quantities as a spice, a medicine, and a foodstuff, it was only in the nineteenth century that it became the omnipresent, mass-produced, habit-forming, and health-impacting commodity we recognize today.

The Victorian period witnessed a staggering rise in global production, from around 572,000 tons in 1830 to 6.1 million tons by 1890.<sup>1</sup> Board of Trade returns show the average individual's consumption in Britain increased sixfold in the same period.<sup>2</sup> Victorian consumers could buy sugar in conical loaves for household baking; in cubes for adding to tea and coffee; and, as mechanization advanced, in an increasingly vast and affordable array of bonbons, sugar plums, and chocolate confections. Factories like Frys in Bristol “pour[ed] forth Chocolate and Cocoa at the rate of several tons per day,” while sugar was even used in nonedible forms like varnish and the boot-blackening that a twelve-year-old Dickens was so famously and so miserably employed in producing.<sup>3</sup>

Important studies including Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1985) and James Walvin's *Sugar: The World Corrupted, from Slavery to Obesity* (2017) have charted economic and social histories of sugar production and consumption. I want to suggest, however, that such a dramatic increase in consumption in Victorian Britain led to sugar becoming dissolved into cultural bloodstreams as well as literal ones. Sugar—and acts of consuming it—acquired figurative and culturally contingent meanings that Victorian writers could use to represent and respond to some of the most pressing cultural questions of their day.

Sugar in Britain had been charged with symbolic significance in abolitionist rhetoric since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as Britain reorganized its commercial production and sought to reframe its national values. In 1791 abolitionist and former enslaved person Ottobah Cugoano voiced support for boycotts of slave-produced goods

---

**Laura Eastlake** is a senior lecturer in English literature at Edge Hill University and the author of *Ancient Rome and Victorian Masculinity* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

*Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 515–518.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

doi:10.1017/S1060150323000074

like sugar: “It would be better to sip the West-India sweetness by paying a little more money,” he argued, “than to drink the blood of iniquity at a cheaper rate.”<sup>4</sup> In the same year, William Fox reported in his pamphlet *On the Propriety of Refraining from the Use of West India Sugar and Rum* the feelings of acquaintances who “cannot look on a piece of sugar without conceiving it stained with spots of human blood.”<sup>5</sup> Seemingly domestic acts of sugar consumption became highly politicized and were made analogous to the consumption not only of slave labor but of human bodies and blood.

By midcentury, sugar had become more commonly associated with gendered affections and relationships. Sugar and sweet-eating were associated with juvenility, femininity, and the domestic sphere. Wendy Woloson’s *Refined Tastes* (2002) and recent studies in feminist food rhetorics have explored this association largely in the context of North America.<sup>6</sup> Yet a novel like Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859–60) shows that in Britain too, sweet-eating was often perceived as antithetical to adult British manliness. Collins’s flamboyant villain, the overweight Italian Count Fosco, devours bonbons, sweetmeats, and “the greater part of a fruit tart, submerged under a whole jugful of cream” in highly conspicuous acts of consumption.<sup>7</sup> Even his friend and co-conspirator Percival Glyde scoffs at Fosco’s habit of rejecting brandy in favor of eau-sucrée: “Sugar-and-water for a man of your age!—There! mix your sickly mess. You foreigners are all alike.”<sup>8</sup> Fosco’s sugar habit appears to mark him out as both unmasculine and distinctly un-British in a period when, as Joanne Ella Parsons notes, “Discipline over the body was perceived as essential in fulfilling the strict boundaries of prescribed manliness, and failure to adhere to dietary and bodily restrictions meant a rejection of the privileged contemporary categories of social acceptability.”<sup>9</sup> Yet rather than deny the charges of juvenility and femininity attached to his chosen diet, Fosco openly plays up to them, proclaiming that “A taste for sweets. . . is the innocent taste of women and children. I love to share it with them.”<sup>10</sup> Of course, Fosco understands perfectly well the cultural connotations of sweet-eating. That he can rely on the prejudices of his companions—and of Collins’s readers—to divert suspicion from himself as criminal mastermind is a testament to how widely understood were mid-Victorian associations of sugar with juvenility and femininity.

By the end of the century, however, changing discourses on nutrition and empire had produced a shift in the signifying power of sugar. Sweet-eating became a particularly potent signifier in the semantics of

British manliness at an individual and national level. In 1899 the *Country Gentleman: Sporting Gazette* noted: “Formerly it used to be considered unmanly to have ‘a sweet tooth,’ but the great nourishing qualities of good chocolate are now a good excuse for the gratification of what is a perfectly natural and wholesome taste.”<sup>11</sup> Sugar and chocolate were proffered as fuel for masculine performance, from the physical endurance of “soldiers . . . long distance racing cyclists and other athletes” to the mental stamina of traders in the City of London, where “an enormous quantity of chocolate is consumed every day.”<sup>12</sup> This newly masculinized hunger for sugar reflects a broader cultural move away from the kind of midcentury masculine ideals described by James Eli Adams, which had emphasized “an elaborately articulated program of self-discipline.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, as Bradley Deane has noted, New Imperialist masculinity was reluctant to be morally prescriptive with regard to manly appetites—whether literal, sexual, or territorial—privileging instead hearty physical vigor and a ludic, even childlike ethos of imperial play and a hunger for competition.<sup>14</sup> Thus, by the end of the century, sugar had been reframed in British national discourse as a fitting fuel for individual or collective masculine endeavor whether physical, commercial, or imperial.

For scholars of the nineteenth century, sugar and its attendant metaphors of sweetness afford us a lens for viewing Victorian cultural change. But perhaps equally importantly, by examining sugar as both consumer product and cultural metaphor in a century that gave rise to many of the products and patterns of consumption we live with today, we can better interrogate the stories that Britain continues to tell itself about the physical, economic, and moral health of the nation.

#### NOTES

1. Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 73.
2. George Baden-Powell, “The Doom of Cane Sugar,” *Fortnightly Review* 61, no. 362 (February 1897): 284–91 (289 on the uses of sugar).
3. “Messrs. Fry’s Chocolate and Cocoa Manufactory, Bristol,” *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 20, no. 528 (February 2, 1884): 533. See Baden-Powell, “The Doom of Cane Sugar,” 289 on uses of sugar in nonedible forms.
4. Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (London: Penguin, 1999), 109.

5. William Fox, *A Call to the People of Great Britain, to Refrain from the Use of West India Sugar and Rum* (London: n.p., 1791), 5. Fox calculates that “in every pound of sugar used . . . we may be considered as consuming two ounces of human flesh” (5).
6. Wendy A. Woloson, *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery and Consumers in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). See also Melissa Goldthwaite, *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017); Jane Dusselier, “Bon-Bons, Lemondrops, and Oh Henry! Bars: Candy, Consumer Culture, and the Construction of Gender, 1895–1920,” in *Kitchen Culture in America: Representations of Food, Gender and Race*, edited by Sherrie A. Inness (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 13–49; Sherrie A. Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2001).
7. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, edited by Maria K. Bachman (Toronto: Broadview, 2006), 308.
8. Collins, *The Woman in White*, 338.
9. Joanne Ella Parsons, “Fosco’s Fat: Transgressive Consumption and Bodily Control in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*,” in *The Victorian Male Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 216.
10. Collins, *The Woman in White*, 338.
11. “The Popularity of Chocolate,” *Country Gentleman: Sporting Gazette* (November 25, 1899), 1487.
12. “The Popularity of Chocolate,” 1487.
13. James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 2.
14. Bradley Deane, *Masculinity and the New Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

