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Being Boys: Youth, Leisure and Identity in the Inter-War Years

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The history of Britain during the two inter-war decades could be characterised by reference to a process by which, while the nation still clung to many of its pre-1914 imperial certainties (which in many ways still defined British identity), society was exposed to, and ?Britishness? to a degree undermined by, the forces of Americanisation. These were felt most significantly through the twin institutions of the dance-hall and the picture palace. Americanisation found no more willing participants than substantial sections of the young, many of whom wanted to reject the values of the Great War generation, who by 1935 many youngsters felt they had little in common with. It is in this context that *Being Boys* can usefully be located, as it explores the personal and public lives of young men as they made the journey through to manhood, and interacted with both imperial and non-imperial organisations, institutions and cultures in the 1920s and 1930s. Using her father Les?s diaries (written in the 1930s when he was himself a Northampton teenager), as a starting point (and a source to which the author returns at regular intervals), *Being Boys* offers a fresh perspective on youth by putting particular emphasis on ?emotional experiences and often tentative self-making? of this age group (p. 1). The book is certainly influenced by current trends within the academy to place the body and masculinity at the centre of historical inquiry, which move the book in a rather different direction to earlier treatments of youth in this period, such as those provided by Andrew Davies and Stephen Humphries among others. Tebbutt notes that these authors were perhaps rather more interested in themes such as ?youth in

trouble?. David Fowler by contrast had put more emphasis on the ability of youth by the mid 1930s to consume, anticipating this age group?s post-1945 characteristics in *The First Teenagers*.(1)

Tebbutt begins her study by looking at the leaders of youth clubs after the Great War, who, the author notes, were fairly tolerant of ?liberated? youth and were themselves motivated by the wish to recreate the spirit of comradeship which was a feature of the years 1914?18. Several of the leaders had had spells of involvement with the university settlements before the war. The problem, as it faced the leaders, was to maintain a sense of masculine citizenship amongst boys in an era when the aggressive imperialist-citizen of the pre-war period was being intellectually eroded. The discussion of club leaders leads into a second chapter in which Les?s diary is used extensively to explore the pre-1914 youth movements that reached their zenith in the 1920s and 1930s, most notably the Scouts and Boys Brigade, the latter of which Les was a member. There is a lovely vignette taken from his diary, which will strike a chord with many who subsequently took part in these youth movements, which describes a formative moment in his changing attitude to the Boys Brigade. Les at that point was clearly out-growing the Brigade and its codes of conduct and effectively began to lark about and deliberately infringe the stringent codes of the Brigade, turning up late and sloping off without any elder apparently knowing his whereabouts (p.75).

In contrast to the Boys Brigade, the youth clubs of the 1930s were rather more relaxed affairs and had none of the quasi-military culture that came with the Brigade or Scouting movement. Here indeed, the clubs were ultimately to experiment with the mixing of genders, which was not entirely successful, documented in the earlier work of Marcus Collins in his book *Modern Love*.(2) Tebbutt draws attention to the fact that youths had their own motivations for joining these clubs too, often drawn to activities such as football, and so joining when the season was about to begin. Perhaps Tebbutt undermines her focus on the youth organisations to a degree by noting that only a comparatively small percentage of youths joined them. In the next three chapters the author moves from what might be seen as the ?control of youth? to appearance and emotional stability as she explores clothing, bodily appearance and sexual anxieties experienced by young men.

The growing emphasis promoted by both the state, and individuals captivated by physical culture, meant that by the 1930s many youths were encouraged to take a pride in developing the A1 physique, perhaps for the purpose of self-defence, or perhaps to gain acceptance or admiration by one?s peers. In addition, by the 1920s both men and women were being persuaded by commercial agencies to ensure their teeth were clean and that they didn?t omit an offensive body-odour. Looks were becoming more important for this age group, especially as this was one of the subliminal messages given out by films shown at the picture palace. At the same time, however, the influence of cinema saw many youths take up smoking as a life-long habit, undoing much of the good work achieved by physical culture and personal grooming. Les?s diary notes that he acquired a trilby and overcoat in the mid-1930s, and was sometimes mocked by contemporaries for following fashions he had become aware of through his viewing of Hollywood films.

Sartorial elegance was primarily sought with a view to finding a sweetheart. The emotional turmoil that could surround such a quest is explored in a chapter which looks at the letters written by young men to agony aunts. By the mid-1930s these were increasingly employed by the leading dailies to offer advice to the young man who had trouble with women. The letters explore a rather understudied aspect of youth culture and this is one of the most original aspects of the book. Young men appear to have written to such columns because they felt they couldn?t measure up to the new standards expected of a young man, as promoted in film and magazines. In the face of unemployment a jobless male was hardly a catch anyway. For observers, some these letters were an unnecessary indulgence and a distraction for a youth who might more profitably have spent his time looking for employment. Even the aunts themselves sometimes thought young men needed to pull themselves together, or take the bull by the horns and establish the feeling of the girl they had set their heart on. Some of the advice was also rather difficult to decipher, informed as it was in Dorothy Dix?s case (one of the first advice columnists), by American protocol, which used a terminology of courtship that the British didn?t use. Les wrote to one of the aunts and received a response, with the agony aunt suggesting that holding a torch for a girl with whom he had had no regular contact (other than letter writing) since meeting her at a BB camp at Mablethorpe was likely to lead nowhere and he should go and

see her. The chapter as whole begins to offer insights into young men?s interaction with modern advice columns as they developed in the middle of the 1930s and perhaps the fact that young men wrote to such columns is indicative of the rather conservative family values that constrained youth and made it unlikely they would confide in a family member about their feelings.

In other chapters *Being Boys* explores the interaction between boys and the chief sites of leisure in the inter-war period, the dance and the picture palace. The domination by Hollywood of British cinema caused anxiety amongst the older generation, influencing as it did speech, mannerisms and the tendency for youth to daydream; escaping into a fantasy world. It is evident that films made a big impression on young men as well as women. Tastes in film changed quite rapidly across the ?teenage years? as maturity approached. The dance-hall was another important leisure institution of the period, which gave young men the opportunity to meet the opposite sex. In the 1920s, dance styles were relatively wild, characterised by the animal dances that were imported from the USA. By the 1930s, this dancing ?mania? had quelled somewhat and the professionalization of dancing was making itself felt in some dance venues. Such ?professionalisation? posed a problem for some young men, who had therefore to undertake training in rather sophisticated dance-steps in order to attend such institutions, although there were clearly still venues where basic dance-steps were adopted by most patrons. The dance-hall crowd was, as Tebbutt notes, many and varied. In a final chapter Tebbutt examines the rather cheaper forms of entertainment on offer to younger men in the city, such as street-entertainment, cycling, walking, or joining a gang.

How far does *Being Boys* achieve the author?s intentions, and how far does it convince the reader? To return to the author?s initially stated aims, that is to say, a fresh perspective on youth by looking at the personal more than the public face of that age group, the reviewer would suggest that the majority of the chapters do indeed, cast a fresh perspective on inter-war boys? lives. It tempers the work of those historians who have simply cast youth in terms of ?trouble? in this era. Those chapters that deal with advice columns and the emotional engagement with cinema bring a new or different perspective to our understanding of the lives of youth. The integration of Les Tebbutt?s diary was, for the most part, (the diary doesn?t appear in all the chapters), well-executed and interesting and was a useful way of moving from the particular to the general. In fact, after completing the book this reader felt it would have been nice to consider (if possible) more such diaries. At this point in time however, there are only limited examples in the public domain, and a future funded project may well be needed in order to coax more of these diaries out of private families? possession. Les?s diary is supplemented here by recollections of working-class men, which are held at Brunel University, and oral histories stored in various repositories in Manchester and the North-West. My only slight concern here was that one diary was being leant on rather too heavily as being representative of a large group of young men. In the chapter which focuses on dancing, for example, one of the areas it would be useful to know more about is the subject dealt with quite briefly in the book (on pp. 207?8, and the only appearance of subject of ?drink? in the book), as to whether the dance-halls in a sense provoked the introduction of young men to alcohol. There were often disturbances around the inter-war dance-hall, most commonly at the end of the night, and it would be useful to try and assess whether these fights were drink-fuelled or the result of male rivalry over women. Taken as ?Dutch courage?, alcohol was often smuggled into the halls or drunk in the vicinity of them. It would be useful to include any recollections of this from young men who, Tebbutt notes, were often too intimidated to ask a young woman to dance. The other dimension that could have come through more strongly, I feel, is the regional. Les grew up in Northampton, a reasonably small Midland town, and it might be useful to compare the life experiences and options that were available to youth in urban centres that differed in scale. To be fair, the author acknowledges the need for this in her conclusions, which function at one level as a footnote, explaining why a range of topics (including sport) have not been considered, and which point to directions for future research. In her final substantial chapter the author follows young men out into the public sphere, charting their use of leisure-time and providing a useful counterpoint to the study of their emotions. The chapter triggered my own childhood memories of the huge distances I covered around my Berkshire village at a very tender age in the 1970s, still a time before obsessive parental control. Overall, *Being Boys* is a welcome addition to the literature on inter-war youth; contributing to our understanding of American influences across this 20-year period and offering insights into aspects of experiences that affected all young men, not just a minority. The

book furthermore signposts future directions that historians of youth may usefully take over the ensuing decade.

Notes

1. David Fowler, *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyle of Young Wage-earners in Interwar Britain* (London, 1995).Back to (1)
2. Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2003).Back to (2)

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