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Sociability and Power in Late-Stuart England: the Cultural Worlds of the Verneys 1660-1720

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The seventeenth-century Verneys of Claydon House, Buckinghamshire are probably the best documented of all Stuart gentry families, their archives frequently exploited by historians. Their letters enliven general narratives from S.R. Gardiner's civil war volumes onwards, and their papers have been more comprehensively mobilised in an exemplary case study by John Broad of the economic fortunes of the gentry in an era of war, punitive taxation and confiscation, and for a debate about the nature of family relationships between Miriam Slater and Sara Mendelson. Anyone who thought there could be little left to learn will be disabused within a few pages of this fascinating book. Ten-years work of painstaking and systematic research on over 12,000 papers, has resulted in a wide-ranging study of social and cultural change as experienced, or sometimes initiated by the Verneys. Whyman's subtle general points emerge slowly from a mass of detail. Her method is that of lace-maker weaving a series of complex, sometimes repetitive patterns into a broader fabric. The book's detail, and its admirable refusal of over simple generalisations, do not make for easy reading, despite many absorbing and well-chosen vignettes, but perseverance brings many rewards.

Whyman's study is constructed around the life of John Verney, born in 1640, a `younger son in a financially strapped, royalist family that practised primogeniture'. Prompted by circumstances, but also drawn by personal inclination and talent, John made his way in the world as a merchant, but became heir on the death of his brother and nephews and thus succeeded to the estates on the death of his aged father Sir Ralph in 1696. The first chapters cover Sir Ralph's social world after the Restoration, revealing through the matters of business, pleasure and routine - quarter sessions and horse-races, funerals, elections and market days - the

overlapping networks which brought together town and country, rich and poor, men and women in complex interrelationships. The same people appeared over and over again in different guises in Sir Ralph's world - any one neighbour might be a tenant, a potential voter, an object of charity, or a troublesome opponent in a law court.

Whyman then discusses John's life as a Levant merchant who did well in Aleppo after a slow start, and returned to London in 1674, obsessively careful with money and convinced through hard experience of the value of influential connection. Links forged through his former master, Sir Gabriel Roberts, were crucial to his subsequent success. A vivid discussion of London networks presents the city, then as now, as a sum of many more local villages, with Covent Garden and Chelsea as John's particular neighbourhoods. John's wide-ranging economic enterprises, encompassing land, lotteries and investment in public funds as well as overseas trade reveal the impact of the financial revolution. His social contacts and credit relationships (especially) were equally broad and socially diverse.

Chapters on urban sociability, the marriage market and politics follow. The marriage settlements of the Verneys show the tensions between individual aspirations and family strategies, as well as the variety of influences which determined the outcome of any particular courtship. The crucial role marriage to heiresses played in Verney estate building is underlined. Within this family, there was a ruthless focus on dynastic ends, which in the eighteenth century seems to have led to a particularly marked stress on the heir at the expense of younger siblings. Again Whyman stresses the impact of the financial revolution on marriage settlements amongst the elite, with female property increasingly found in stocks, shares and money rather than land.

Finally Whyman discusses Buckinghamshire politics as they became increasingly embroiled with the `rage of party', from the 1670s, to some extent, and very dramatically from the 1690s. Politics `permeated every aspect of the Verneys' lives' and was carried out through everyday social activities [p. 147]. By the 1690s, guest lists for dinners, marriage plans, and horse racing schedules were all defined by party as long-standing neighbourly and kin relations broke down. Sir Ralph found it hard to come to terms with the demands of party, with the need to buy votes and co-operate with national organisations. So, for different reasons did John. He came to Claydon in 1696 with a businessman's attitude to rural social life: his private funeral for his father robbed the country of the usual opportunity for display and hospitality; and he regarded the distribution of venison and other charitable or hospitable acts as a waste of money. In John Verney's long political struggle with his Whig neighbours (and previous friends), the Temples and Dentons, he realised after four lost elections that miserliness did not win votes (although Tory connections led to an Irish title as Viscount Fermanagh in 1703). Treating and hospitality brought success as part of the Tory landslide in 1710, only for changing national trends to bring defeat in 1714.

Whyman's discussions rest especially on the Verneys' correspondence with men and women of all social ranks, including the very humble, `an elegant courtesy letter' from John's black servant from Guinea, another from the `country cook' [7]. She shows how `thick description' of the minutiae of correspondence, visiting, and gifts can illuminate larger issues of gentry and mercantile life, always with an eye for a telling detail or case study. She explores Sir Ralph's life through analysis of his gifts of venison, tracing the body parts of one buck in particular, as in one of the last acts of his life, Sir Ralph sent minutely calibrated gifts to a range of friends, dependent relatives and powerful potential patrons. This looks in some ways like a very traditional preoccupation. The capacity to confer gifts of venison was a symbol of landed hierarchy and elite power, for hunting rights were confined to a few. The movement of joints of venison also revealed a complex web of mutuality and paternalism within hierarchy. Sir Ralph's poor relatives could themselves act as patrons when they subdivided their share amongst even poorer contacts, and all recipients had something to give back to the head of the family. Tenants were often also voters; female relatives provided news, advice on potential marriages and health care.

Yet the distribution of venison was also revelatory of social change. Most of Sir Ralph's deer went in the 1690s to his London contacts: to the landlord of his London base, to an Exchequer teller who had done him an unwise favour. This old country gentleman indeed spent most of his time in the city although he died in

Buckinghamshire. Venison was embedded in a market and money economy rather than offering an alternative tradition of the gift: venison could be sold on, while less obviously the whole process of giving stimulated a round of cash tips to park keepers and carriers.

To show how John `learned the rules of politeness' [84] while a London merchant, Whyman focuses on the visit and the coach. Doing the right thing in London was especially important, and especially difficult, precisely because social contacts there were so fluid. Carefully calibrated visits were essential if sensitive contacts were to be satisfied. The ownership and loan of coaches, even the seating plans within them, were vital demonstrations of standing. The right to visit a richer or more powerful relation or patron was a very public guarantee of status, as was the length and order of visits. If lively, moneyed kin were favoured socially over older women living in genteel poverty, bitter offence could be caused, as happened when John forgot to visit one aunt with his new wife in 1680. Thereafter the aunts helped John negotiate the minefield of urban sociability which combined the informality of frequent short visits with unstated but crucial conventions such as the `rule of the return', ensuring that patterns of visiting could be `cut-throat affairs' [94-5].

In her discussion of urban sociability as throughout the book, Whyman is particularly perceptive on gender relationships and the experience of women, stressing the informal influence women had despite the formal patriarchal structures so evident in the Verney family. Women had more freedom in the town than in country - as arbiters of manners as well as active social beings. They were crucial as marriage brokers and dispensers of news. Whyman stresses the variety of experience found amongst the Verney women: some rich connections chose to avoid marriage - for a variety of motives, but other single women faced a lifetime of humiliating financial dependency. The Verney family had its share of `defiant and independent women' such as John's third wife Elizabeth who `expressed strong opinions, invested in the city, bred her own animals and influenced the giving of patronage' [141] and played a major role in estate management and electoral politics, especially in 1713 [170-1]. Characteristically, `overlap and complexities' rather than rigid distinctions between male and female worlds are the hallmarks of Whyman's analysis [108].

The ageing patriarch Ralph and the younger son turned head of family John are portrayed with consummate skill, as are John's first and third wives and the vulnerable, impoverished but never to be ignored roll-call of importunate aunts. On the other hand, the tantalising glimpses of the most unsatisfactory first son, `Mun' (Edmund), whose womanising and drunkenness drove his unfortunate wife mad, make one impatient for a full account [pp 116-7].

Whyman's book is an exercise in the application of technology to qualitative rather than quantitative material: John Verney's correspondence as heir and head of the family along with other crucial documents (as outlined in Appendix One) have been indexed for two complex subject and thematic databases. This enables Whyman to offer some brief and effective summing up of family and friendship networks, by tabulating who wrote to whom, and how often; and to indicate the preoccupations of correspondents with some fascinating results. Coaches were mentioned in 165 letters, 1692-1717, elections in 570, taxes in 139, marriage in 656, pregnancy in 61 and death in 247. This is not done mechanically - as already indicated Whyman's more characteristic technique is for the detailed, revealing vignette, not the statistical table.

Whyman is aware of the problems in interpreting letters - self-conscious textual constructions, which are `only partially transparent'. Claims that correspondence allows us to `eavesdrop on the thoughts of people' [pp 11, 7] are perhaps occasionally too straightforward - as Whyman's comments elsewhere acknowledge. There may be a fundamental distortion in the archive deriving from the fact that Sir Ralph, in particular, ensured that the family correspondence was carefully preserved - as `an ordered family memory' [179]. Furthermore, the frequency of referral to a topic in letters is not necessarily a measure of significance. Some things were `too painful for expression': the tragically early death of John Verney's beloved first wife hardly registered in the database [p. 119]. Others were evaded: the cautious Verneys [p. 65] `hesitated to put beliefs in writing' - in the tense years after the Restoration.

An overly-literal acceptance of the `truth' of personal sources contributes to an account of political change

that is rather less nuanced than other sections. She not only accepts at face-value Sir Ralph's self-image as a moderate, peacemaker - [`I am always for peace', was his motto, p. 157], but assumes he is representative of the whole of gentry society before the Restoration. Buckinghamshire, the county of John Hampden as well as Sir Ralph's loyal courtier father who perished trying to hold on to the king's standard at Edgehill, was surely riven by political conflict before the age of party. Whyman adopts Kishlansky's account of the rise of adversary politics after 1660, but this may be an oversimplified narrative found in the nostalgic self-presentations of those struggling to cope with the party politics of the later seventeenth century. In the Verney papers specifically the sources may themselves construct a paternalistic golden age, used by correspondents to criticise the undoubted innovations of John Verney, running his estate like a business until forced to modify his stance for electoral motives [159]. On the other hand, we are given a complex and thought provoking picture of John the Tory squire. As a younger London merchant he had been a devotee of Latitudinarian preaching and in practice willing, for the sake of business, to socialise and even worship with dissenters. Neither did he have any truck with Jacobitism after 1715.

Appendix One and the Introduction are central successful elements in the welcome and rather unusual methodological self-consciousness in Whyman's book. Each chapter is also punctuated by thought-provoking, but overly compressed passages dealing with theoretical issues, sometimes amounting to little more than brief soundbites from a bewildering range of scholars. Readers may be provoked into questioning the absence of their own pet theorists amongst the crowd - Pierre Bourdieu for example is missing.

On occasion, as with the use of Kishlansky's framework of political change, Whyman's book adds depth and subtlety to an overall picture provided by others, rather than providing a distinctive interpretation. But in two areas she provides particularly valuable contributions to our understanding of social change in this period: the massive impact of London, and the complicated intermingling of mercantile and gentle culture. She shows brilliantly how `social lives, cultural values, and personal networks' were affected by the growing importance of London.

By the later seventeenth-century London was crucial to all aspects of gentry life - as marriage market, centre of consumption, entertainment and good conversation, of law and politics. John performed a crucial role for his family as a London broker, buying treats, sending news, and contacting lawyers. After inheriting Claydon, John, like his father in his later years, spent the bulk of the year in London.

There is an equally valuable discussion on the relationships between merchants and gentlemen. . `Hybrids' like John Verney moved without much difficulty from their gentry upbringing to a merchant's life and back again to inherit a landed estate - central to a `society en route to gentlemanly capitalism' [83]. In insisting that the experiences of younger sons of gentry (like John) who became merchants are as influential as those of born-merchants who aspired to gentility, Whyman's work endorses and adds to Grassby's study of London businessmen. The Verney papers show some suspicion of the power of money, but widespread approval of mercantile lifestyles and trade. They show also extensive participation in the financial revolution, with both men and women of the gentry more prominent as investors than official ledgers indicate. These two valuable arguments are connected for as Whyman argues, `Surely the accommodation of land and trade is more likely to be found on the streets of London, then in searches for merchant purchases of country estates'. [84]

Sociability and Power vividly reveals how broad structural changes - in the economy, in family life, or structures of power - are not simply reflected in the minute details of `everyday life', but are actually made possible, carried through in changing habits of lending money, visiting, friendship networks and gift-giving. The expansion of London, the `rage of party', the increasing importance of credit and trade are all revealed and created in these routine events. The necessary enterprise of younger sons, is seen, in the person of John Verney, as closely associated with the adventurous, `liminal activity' of commerce [Agnew, quoted, p. 43]. Younger sons were `agents of change' [179], central to `modernity'. In her introduction Whyman promises that the life of John Verney - a Levant trader and city merchant, but then a landed Tory Viscount - can provide `an ideal lens for observing a society as it adapted to change' [p.13]. This promise is triumphantly fulfilled.

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