

Claiming the Streets: Processions and Urban Culture in South Wales, c. 1830-1880

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Lucinda Matthews-Jones

Paul O'Leary's *Claiming the Streets: Processions and Urban Culture in South Wales, c.1830–1880* provides a detailed and lively account of mid 19th-century processional culture. It takes us on a journey through Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath and Swansea and investigates the diversity and complexity of street procession in these towns. According to O'Leary, the period 1830–80 witnessed the growth, proliferation and democratisation of processional culture, including 'funeral processions, the celebrations of friendly societies, temperance processions' (p. 9) as well as protest processions run by groups such as the Welsh Chartists (see chapter 3). O'Leary demonstrates that processions were part of the everyday rhythms of community in Wales and that they provided a unique mode of kinetic commentary on social and political issues. Indeed, mid 19th-century processions were both 'exceptional and cumulatively routine' (p. 9), placing groups, individuals and societies on display. O'Leary's book is centred on five themes: how processional culture ordered, sobered, sacralised and diversified the streets of south Wales. In order to unpack and explore the contours of these themes, O'Leary turns to Chartists, Friendly Societies, temperance movements, and a number of religious denominations under the rubric of Anglicanism, Non-Conformism and Catholicism for his material.

Despite the emergence of a strong processional culture in the 19th century, O'Leary argues that there is no comprehensive definition, from the period, of what made a procession. He notes that 19th-century journalists and social commentators rarely provided a single definition of the term. This in part reflects the variety of processional culture in this period, he argues. There were, nonetheless, social rules at play which led to some street events being labelled processions while others were excluded. According to O'Leary, there were three

factors which would admit a street event to the category of procession. Firstly, it needed to be 'orderly and self-disciplined'. Secondly, it had to be concerned with 'a specific goal other than walking the street' and, lastly, it needed to be a performative act that put processors on display. At the heart of O'Leary's book, therefore, is a concern to consider the role of respectability in processions. Rather than perceiving respectability to be a form of emulation or cross-class blurring, however, O'Leary highlights that it was a script which reinforced behaviour and enabled the processors to be seen in a positive light. Clothing, for example, enabled processors to express self-discipline, collective identity, and appropriate gender ideals in front of bystanders and journalists. O'Leary thus builds and expands on Simon Gunn's work to consider more fully how people of all classes were able to articulate (both orally and visually) civic, religious and social identities on South Wales's urban streets.⁽¹⁾ Processions enabled a large number of collective identities to develop and provided a space in which these identities were negotiated and re-configured. As O'Leary argues of his book, 'a study of processions had the potential to unlock some of the processes by which individuals and groups come to feel at home in strange places and how new identities were inscribed in public' (p. vii).

Yet O'Leary's book does much more than to simply refashion Welsh urban history. O'Leary encourages historians to reclaim the street as a serious site of historical study. Street culture offers us the opportunity, he argues, to explore Victorian society at a number of levels (political, religious and social) in a way that other social spaces do not. Leif Jerram has recently argued that 'It is time to put the *where* into the *what* and the *why*' in historical research and O'Leary makes important strides towards this goal in *Reclaiming the Streets*.⁽²⁾ The book carefully elucidates what 19th-century street culture was and how people sought to negotiate and narrate it. 'One of the most elusive aspects of urban history is uncertainty about what actually went on in the street', O'Leary points out (p. 6). Existing scholarship has tended to view the 19th-century street as a site of danger, conflict and intrigue; a place of sexual harassment, prostitutes and criminals. O'Leary does much to challenge this narrative by providing scholars with a detailed account of quite different kinds of street culture. Individual chapters highlight the diversity and richness of street processions in the middle decades of the 19th century and show how different groups used the street as 'a theatre of social action' in different ways (p. 1).

In order to recover the vibrant nature of 19th-century street processions, O'Leary has used newspapers extensively (see pp. 15–6). By building on the work of cultural studies as well as history, O'Leary not only provides a vivid account of processional culture, but brings the subject to life by considering the various layers of processional culture such as the body and its movement, the material culture of individual processions through dress, and insignia, and finally the soundscape of the street procession. This provides a vivid picture of street life and highlights the ways in which processors were able to articulate a sense of self at a personal, local and national level. If I had one small criticism, though, it would be that I felt the book would have been enhanced by a greater engagement with visual sources. As O'Leary notes throughout this book, processions knit streets and districts together. Yet, unless you had some familiarity with these Welsh towns, it was difficult to visualise the movement of the processions under discussion. The use of maps, or perhaps even the use of GIS to map processional activities, would have helped readers to visualise the topic. The book contains four images that are left to stand on their own in the middle. These could have been embedded and referred to in the body of the appropriate chapter. I was left wondering why they had been included at all.

Claiming the Streets is, for the most part, structured thematically, with the first two chapters introducing readers to the book's themes and to 19th-century South Wales. Chapter one, 'Street processions and ritual in the Victorian town', outlines the theoretical and methodological basis for studying ritual, streets, walking, dress, respectability and music. These themes form the basis of future chapters and O'Leary's attempts to uncover the development of public identities through processional culture. He writes that 'making 'the public' a concrete and lived reality was a protracted and contested process; it was shaped and directed by a combination of urban growth and the reconfiguration of towns, as well as by social and economic instability in the first phase of the industrial revolution and the increasing demand for political rights' (p. 24). Chapter two, 'Town and region: the urban context', provides a detailed account of the book's key civic, industrial

and urban centres to highlight the diversity of social, civil, religious and charitable groups involved in processional culture.

Chapters three to seven provide readers with individual case studies which consider how various groups interwove street procession into their activities. Political protest kick starts O'Leary's case studies as chapter three examines 'Protest, processions and stability'. This chapter begins with an exploration of chartist activity in order to highlight how 'the use of public space was frequently a source of contention' (p. 51). South Wales, in particular Newport and Merthyr Tydfil, had vibrant Chartist movements which led to increased crowd activity and demands for reform. By looking at street processions, O'Leary demonstrates how Welsh Chartists sought to connect themselves to a larger community and to reconfigure bourgeois public space through their actions. While memories of Chartist protest might dominate current understandings of public space of this period, there were in fact attempts at the time to bring all classes together through processional activity for key episodic moments such as the Dock procession of 1842 in Newport.

From politics, O'Leary moves on to consider the processional culture of friendly societies in chapter four, 'Ordering the streets: friendly society processions'. As he notes, voluntary associations 'were not restricted to private meetings and discussions, but extended their remit to embrace public display' including the street procession (pp.79-80). In this chapter, he charts the rise of friendly societies following the Poor Law Act of 1834. Friendly societies were keen to 'chart the connections between the important local institutions in their society: the public house and place of worship' (p. 83). Many towns in South Wales established yearly processions. These enabled friendly society members to publically interweave their social and religious needs within an urban ceremony. For journalists, these events provided the means to scrutinise the behaviour of processers (and therefore local inhabitants). Indeed, friendly societies, like the Oddfellows, Foresters and Druids, were not without their critics. They were criticised for their 'extremely odd' carnivalesque rituals, regalia and symbolism, which appeared to challenge official religion (p.84) or, according to the *Western Mail* in 1870, distracted members from their true purpose, 'to aid the weak, alleviate distress, and comfort the mourner' (p. 94).

The multiplicity of 19th-century processional culture can be highlighted by the development of temperance and teetotal processions as discussed in chapter five, 'Sobering the streets'. If the 'symbolic urban geography of friendly societies included the streets, the public houses and places of worship' (p. 101) then O'Leary demonstrates how temperance organisations sought to provide alternative spatial reference points (chapel halls, tents, market houses and school rooms) and refreshments (tea and cake). Furthermore, the melodramatic tableaux used in Cardiff and Neath 'brought the hidden effects of drunkenness into the public arena and established a link between behaviour in public and private spheres' (p. 110). Such public displays did not go unnoticed as the boisterous and dramatic battles were undertaken by brewers and publicans over who owned the streets. Part of this contestation emerged, according to O'Leary, because the temperance street processions were challenging and questioning the gaze of the by-stander and as such creating an 'us and them' distinction.

Religion is an important theme throughout *Claiming the Streets*. But it is in the following two chapters that a detailed investigation and, for me, thought provoking assessment of public displays of religion in South Wales is developed. Up until this point, O'Leary has largely considered religion in terms of fixed environments like the church and chapel. What makes chapter six and seven a brilliant assessment of 19th-century religious faith is the way that O'Leary pushes religion out of the building and onto the street. As O'Leary notes, 'Street processions provide one example of the process whereby outdoor public space was 'captured' by religious organisations ... a process that served to 'sacralise' spaces that were usually considered to be devoted to secular activities' (p. 123). In chapter six, 'Sacralising the street', he considers how religion was inscribed into these Welsh towns and cities by Protestant movements like the Orange Order and (Non-Conformist and Church of England and Wales) Sunday Schools. Hymns, banners and the processors wove religion into the fabric of the city to sanctify public space. Processions could also be used to illustrate differences between these Protestant bodies. This increasingly become the case when Non-conformist Sunday schools started to shape 'the identity of participants in more complex ways than simply

reinforcing allegiance to a particular church, chapel or denomination' especially after 1860s when questions of disestablishing the Anglican Church began to dominate political discourse (p. 142).

In contrast, the Salvation Army and the Irish Catholic Corpus Christi processions provide examples of how sacralising the street was dependent on who was doing it and when it was being done. Chapter seven considers 'Diversity on the street' and how the Welsh religious landscape was not bound solely to Anglican and Non-conformist struggles. While both groups highlight the diversity of South Wales's religious streetscape, they also reveal for O'Leary how processional culture was dependent on certain types of gendered behaviours. The Salvation Army pushed the boundaries of respectability with their positioning and behaviour of female Salvionists, while the white dresses of the Corpus Christi female processor illustrated a refined and respectable femininity. As such, Corpus Christi procession emulated and responded to traditions of processional culture outlined throughout the book. Yet they did so by processing on Thursdays and knitting the Marquis of Bute's estate into the city. In doing this, processors highlighted that the sacred was not necessary Protestant nor indeed contained to Sundays.

Claiming the Streets provides a comprehensive and enjoyable study of streets processions. O'Leary demonstrates that the public sphere was variously inscribed by processors with religious, social and political messages through banners, songs, clothes and the rituals of specific groups and organisations. The book successfully marries together a social and cultural approach to urban history. It would be a great addition to any urban or 19th-century British history curriculum and will be of interest to all those working in modern British history. I just hope the price of £65 won't put people off.

Notes

1. Simon Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City, 1840–1914* (Manchester, 2007). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Leif Jerram, *Streetlife: The Untold History of Europe's Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2011), p. 4. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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