

Smoking in British popular culture 1800-2000

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Author:

Matthew Hilton

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Sean O'Connell

Matthew Hilton has produced an extremely well written account of smoking in popular culture. It is crafted skilfully in an attractive prose style that fully reflects the call of the editor of the Studies in Popular Culture series for readable and accessible academic writing. In his debut monograph Hilton has established himself as an historian of real ability and great promise.

The first task he sets himself is to delineate the bourgeois-liberal context of nineteenth century smoking. He maintains this provided the ideological architecture through which most of the important subsequent debates about tobacco have been constructed. In an inspired choice, he utilises Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to illustrate this argument. Conan Doyle shared a Victorian belief that each man, at least those of the middle classes, smoked in his own individual way. This belief provided Doyle's great sleuth, Sherlock Holmes, with regular, crime-solving intelligence. Hilton also visits Victorian literary journals and magazines that featured regular articles on the history and practice of smoking. The selection and use of tobacco was represented, therein, in a form that facilitated a rationalisation of an act of masculine consumption. Tobacco was placed alongside a number of commodities, such as fine wine, tailored clothing, and mechanical gadgets, that could be appreciated only by tasteful and rational, bourgeois male consumers. This consumption was divorced from the supposedly passive or directed shopping habits of the female consumer. Extensive knowledge of these 'masculine' products also served to de-feminise their consumption. Thus copious articles paid homage to the intellectual and skilful attributes associated with the male smoker.

This section of Hilton's work can be usefully juxtaposed with a growing body of historical literature that is revising all-too-readily received assumptions about gender and consumption in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, to produce a much more nuanced understanding of the processes involved. There are, for example, important echoes of Christopher Breward's recent study on male fashion consumption in Hilton's discussion of the bourgeois fetishisation of male smoking rituals.⁽¹⁾ This relationship is most

obvious in the section dealing with the nineteenth century and the form of bourgeois-liberal masculinity that surrounded tobacco use. We learn that this culture worshipped the cigar and the pipe at the expense of the cigarette and that the latter was commonly associated with the feminine and the foreign. The cigarette was, according to a number of magazine articles a 'miserable apology for manly pleasure' that was suited to the 'effeminate races of the Continent and the East'. The cigarette smoker was a passive consumer, whilst the pipe or cigar aficionado was knowing and discriminating.

Tracing the smoking rituals of working class men proved more elusive. They had neither the time nor the resources to fetishise their habit in literary journals. Hilton provides evidence of what appears to have been a more communal and regionally diverse culture - focused upon the workplace and the public house - than that practised by their bourgeois contemporaries. Initially these practices revolved around the pipes that were given away, in their thousands, by publicans to be filled with a variety of tobacco products that were selected frequently as the result of regional or occupational factors. Mass production in the late nineteenth century provided the impulse for a growing working-class cigarette buying public. Conspicuous cigarette smoking in the company of the street corner boys who inhabited plebeian neighbourhoods commonly marked rites of passage from working class boyhood to wage-earning manhood. Hilton concludes that the Victorian and Edwardian male working class smoker probably looked upon smoking - and what, where, when and how he smoked - as just as an important component in self-fashioning as did his bourgeois contemporary. Thus we are returned to the recurring theme of the ideology of the liberal individual.

The anti-tobacco movement, from Victorian crusaders through to contemporary British Medical Association campaigners, are also, Hilton concludes, best understood from the standpoint of the culture of independence and individuality. The Victorian and Edwardian anti-tobacco movement, whose roots lay in non-conformist religion, struggled to establish its case. A major Achilles' heel proving to be the over-egged list of ailments that it ascribed to smoking. These included lip and throat cancer, deafness, blindness, alongside physical, mental and moral paralysis. Its major success came about when its concerns chimed with the broader debate about racial and national degeneration, which became more prevalent following the panic about the poor state of many potential Boer War recruits. 'Smoker's heart' was said to be the medical problem lying behind up to a third of the military rejects from Lancashire. This focused minds on the health of the nation's youth and anti-tobacco campaigners found their pleas for legislation on juvenile smoking more readily received. Sir Benjamin Brodie, an eminent physician, argued that the racial decline of both the 'Red Indians' and the 'lazy and lethargic Turks' had been precipitated through smoking and that Britain's fate lay in the hands of the nation's youth. Of course, what was really in their hands were the many cheap, mass produced cigarette brands that began appearing on the market in the late nineteenth century. Hilton describes 1883, when W.D. & H.O. Wills of Bristol began using the Bonsack machine to produce cigarettes, as the most crucial date in the history of tobacco. In making cigarettes cheaper it paved the way for a mass market. The sketchy evidence strongly suggests that there was a marked increase in the numbers of juvenile smokers in the 1880s and 1890s. The resultant outcry eventually produced a legislative response in the form of the Children's Act of 1908. The act prohibited the sale of tobacco products to youths less than sixteen years of age, although, as hundreds of thousands of 'school bike-shed smokers' have discovered, it was to be one of the most transgressed laws of the twentieth century. However, the anti-tobacco lobby did not seek to impose legislation on adult smokers. Sharing the bourgeois individualist ideologies of smoking's proponents, they sort to persuade individuals to give up tobacco rather to coerce them to do so.

By the inter-war period anti-tobacco campaigning had waned because, Hilton argues, of 'a cultural shift in which there was a different understanding of the relationship between the product, the market and the individual.' (76) In other words, a mass market arrived, represented by lower prices, greater consumption, together with more sophisticated and extensive advertising and marketing. Hilton describes this lucidly and in the process again ensures that his history is not simply one about tobacco and smoking. His work will inform our understanding of the impact of modernity on British society. Moreover, in tracing the evolving nomenclature of tobacco brand names it charts the impact of British society on one modern consumer industry. Thus brands drew regularly upon British heritage, military themes or other imagery that was calculated to appeal to 'the mass'. The lengthy discussion on advertising and marketing of cigarettes

represents the best exposition of these practices yet to feature in a British historical case study. From these foundations, Hilton produces a detailed narrative of the evolution of branding and market segmentation. His argument is that cigarette manufacturers attempted to use the powerful new advertising medium to standardise consumption. It is not explicitly acknowledged, but this was clearly a textbook attempt at a form of consumer engineering that mirrored the production engineering that made the mass market possible in the first place. (2) This section is also richly illustrated and the reader is given a rare opportunity to assess the academic commentary alongside the primary sources. Later chapters on masculinity and femininity expand some of these themes, discussing the relationship between different brands, gender identities and the extent to which smokers and manufacturers constructed the relationship between these. The importance of this link between marketing and consumer self-fashioning was highlighted by an exercise in blind product testing, carried out after the Second World War by Mass Observation, during which many smokers failed to recognise their favourite brand.

The inter-war years also witnessed the democratisation of pipe use, it becoming associated with a middlebrow, common sense masculine identity. This was seized upon and knowingly deployed, at different times, by politicians such as Stanley Baldwin and Harold Wilson. There is no mention, however, of a pipe user who was arguably even better known than these two illustrious figures. Eric Morecambe famously smoked a pipe to heterosexualise his bedroom scenes with Ernie Wise, in which the comic duo shared a bed for many of their TV sketches. In the process, Morecambe brought new layers of meaning to the masculinity of the pipe.

Unlike the pipe the cigar was not democratised during the twentieth century. Its use was only sanctioned at times when display and flamboyancy were accepted - such as Christmas. Only the socially exalted could get away with regular cigar smoking, others risked being perceived as uncultured and nouveau rich. Thus infamous cigar users include the illegal street bookmaker Sam Grundy from Walter Greenwood's novel *Love on the Dole* and Arthur Daley from the TV serial *Minder*.

The history of the female smoker is one of changing conceptions of respectability and the role of commerce in this transformation. The cigarette became important in the signification of new public expressions of womanhood: a process that gained in pace during the Edwardian and inter-war decades. Hilton explains that this is only explainable in the context of changing employment patterns. Like working-class male smokers, less is known about female smoking practices than is the case for bourgeois pipe, cigar and cigarette aficionados. It is only possible to speculate as to the extent of female smoking in the early-to mid-nineteenth century. By the end of that century a critique of women as smokers was being paraded that will be familiar to historians who have worked on any number of aspects of 'modern' women's behaviour, whether it be the use of sewing machines, cinema going, motoring or political involvement. Rhetoric about female smokers highlighted its dangers for both individual women and for the nation's health as a whole. Criticisms focused on factors such as the potential damage to female reproductive capacity and the biological and cultural 'blurring' of the sexes. Rhetoric like this ensured that Victorian and Edwardian cigarette manufacturers were wary of directing advertising directly at the female consumer. Hilton maintains that the impact of the two world wars and cinema ensured that this conservative marketing strategy was supplanted by increasing attempts to stimulate product differentiation and demand based upon gender. There was, however, a great deal of androgyny about many popular brands such as Craven 'A' or Weights. As the twentieth century ticked on both genders were also experiencing increasing, if uneven, forms of leisure and disposable income. These factors were important in making the cigarette a ubiquitous aspect of public life: by 1948 82 per cent of males and 41 per cent of females were smokers.

The final section of the book deals with the health scares that haunted smokers and tobacco manufacturers alike in the second half of the twentieth century. Hilton succinctly explains the technical and scientific arguments, which for so long allowed both groups to cast doubts on the smoking-cancer link. He maintains that whilst manufacturers challenged the growing medical evidence about the link between cancer and tobacco, the 'key to understanding the history of post-war smoking is the survival of the liberal notions of the smoking individual within a broad popular culture that contested the ability of the state to intervene in lifestyle decisions [7]. So despite what was becoming increasingly clear about the nature of addiction and the

inability of smokers to quit, it was the masculine culture of tobacco, established by Victorian bourgeois smokers, that formed the backdrop to the reception of health scares surrounding smoking from the 1950s onwards. A factor highlighted by other writers on the post-war tobacco industry is that of the economic importance and influence of the industry, but Hilton makes less of this in detailing successive governments' policies on advertising and health promotion.⁽³⁾ More space and, one senses, more faith is placed in what he calls the 'more ideological' factor that formed the culture of the independent, liberal individual', as configured around the use of tobacco. To test this theory an analysis of several newspapers and their responses at significant moments during the smoking and health debate are analysed and this makes for enlightening reading. Early reports on smoking and cancer were met by comprehensive coverage in the Guardian, fears about share prices in the Express (which was followed up by a persistent scepticism towards the medical establishment) and reports that the Russians were developing a cancer-free cigarette in the News of the World. All of which underlines the claim that public awareness of the scientific debate was at best uneven. In such a climate it is easy to follow Hilton's argument about the continuing importance of the bourgeois liberal culture of smoking, in which everyone was prepared to take personal responsibility for their actions and all seemed to have a healthy, octogenarian, life-long smoker for a grandparent. However, we are presented with interesting quotations on addiction, which have important and largely unacknowledged consequences for Hilton's argument. One medical journal, cited in the text, is compelling in this respect:

The tendency to adjust one's beliefs so as to exonerate one's own behaviour is shown not only in the distribution of attitudes to the cigarette smoking-lung cancer hypothesis, but also in the common view that only heavy smoking is dangerous, with heavy smoking being defined as a level of consumption one step higher than one's own [227].

Seen through the prism of quotations like this the medical and biological nature of addiction is difficult to reconcile with arguments about a liberal, individual 'ideology' of tobacco use. More discussion was required on this topic, which is the weak link in the monograph. Perhaps this is because of the nature of the evidence deployed to chart smoker's experiences of tobacco. It is acknowledged in one endnote that only a dedicated oral history project is likely to uncover fully the female material experiences of cigarettes. Certainly there are many areas where it seems likely that an ethnographic approach might have produced rewarding narratives. This study is immensely strong in its study of representations of smoking, but is less solid in analysing everyday cigarette use from the school bike sheds through to failed efforts to quit the habit and beyond, and, in too many cases, to the cancer ward. Ethnographic material is supplied through the amazingly fruitful archives of Mass Observation, but the ability of that organisation to let real people 'speak for themselves' has been seriously questioned by scores of social historians. Mass Observation did let people speak for themselves in formats that were too frequently de-contextualised. The final section on femininity raised a number of important issues which underline Hilton's acknowledgement of the need for an oral history in this area. All too briefly the possible use of cigarettes by women to cope with a number of negative feelings is discussed. This is potentially of great importance when taken together with the changing gender dynamic of the smoking population: between 1948 and 1990 the proportion of adult males smoking fell from 82% to 38%, whilst the proportion of women only fell from 41% to 31%. There is an extremely important story still to be told here.

This final point does not undermine what is clearly a fine piece of historical scholarship. The range of sources employed here is significant from advertisements and trade periodicals, through to novels and medical literature. Moreover they are used intelligently and their limitations are frequently acknowledged in what is a confident and healthily self-reflexive monograph.

Notes

1. Christopher Breward, *The hidden consumer: masculinities, fashion and city life 1860-1914* (Manchester University Press, 1999). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For a discussion of consumer engineering see Kenon Brezeale, 'In spite of women: Esquire magazine

- and the construction of the male consumer', *Signs*, 20 (1994), 1-22.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Peter Taylor, *Smoke ring: the politics of tobacco* (Bodley Head, 1984). Mervyn Read, *The politics of tobacco: policy networks and the cigarette industry* (Avebury, 1996).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be responding further.

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