

For Home, Country, and Race: Constructing Gender Class and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880-1914

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Reviewer:

Gillian Sutherland

The articulation of a national network of elementary schools in England and Wales after 1870 and legislation to compel attendance at these schools from 1880 created marvellous opportunities for publishers. School authorities were major purchasers and the children in their schools a captive audience. Stephen Heathorn provides an account of the scale of this enterprise and an analysis of the content of the some of the major sellers among the books.

Information on the manner in which the trend-setter, the London School Board, chose its books, publication figures for selected publishers and the details of Heathorn's own sample are gathered together in three important Appendices at the end of his text. They are almost worth looking at first, because they provide essential context for the book's qualitative discussion; they might, with advantage, have followed immediately on the discussion of numbers and mechanisms in pp.13-17 of his 'Introduction'. These Appendices are complemented by useful information about authors, spread throughout the text, which shows how many of that emerging late Victorian professional group, academics, found writing and compiling school text-books a nice little earner. All of this material will be an important resource for any one else working in this area.

The bulk of the study offers an analysis of the content of various well-selling specialist series and of 'readers', reading books with short extracts from a range of sources, literary, historical, geographical, occasionally scientific, in ascending order of difficulty. These formed the staple diet in most elementary schools, where the bulk of the effort went into teaching the '3 Rs'; and they reached a far wider audience than

specialist history or geography books. Heathorn shows in convincing detail how such materials were used in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to shape a patriotic and imperial discourse, with an increasingly marked socio-biological slant.

The book's subtitle also promises an exploration of class and gender. These prove rather harder to deliver, for a variety of reasons. Some of the books and series Heathorn discusses were aimed more at the expanding middle class market; and although they might be used in the higher standards of the elementary schools, they hardly reached the vast mass of the population clustered in the lower standards. This is a point he acknowledges from time to time; but there might have been a case for separating the sections of the discussion out more sharply. With footnotes at the end of the book and not at the bottom of the page, it is a considerable labour to check the source of every direct quotation and reflect on the likely readership.

Issues of gender are addressed through an account of the introduction of subjects specifically for girls and the growing emphasis in reading books on a very sharp separation of masculine and feminine spheres. However a fuller exploration of both themes is limited by a rather larger problem, the difficulty of gathering information on how the material in reading books was received and construed in the classroom. It is a problem Heathorn acknowledges in his Introduction and to which he returns briefly in his Conclusion, making a little use there of some of the material gathered by oral historians.

It is a bigger problem than he is prepared to admit. In telling us what is in the books the children had to read – in some cases almost learn by heart – he gives us only half the story. If we are going to talk about the construction of ideas and social roles, we need to know how the children responded, what they made of what they were offered: it really does take two to tango. This is difficult enough in the contemporary world, but how much harder for the late nineteenth century; it is unfortunate that Jonathan Rose's rich, if only partially digested study, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, came out in 2001, after this book was published. (*)

Nevertheless, Heathorn could ask some more pointed questions of the material he has. He mentions that teaching was an increasingly feminised occupation. Perhaps he might have asked what the children made of female authority figures when juxtaposed against the texts they read. Jane Miller has used such a question to make some fundamental and disquieting points about the status and process of teaching in English society over the last hundred years, in *School for Women* (Virago; London, 1996). Heathorn mentions in passing the contrast between the images of home purveyed in school reading books and the realities which many working class children knew. Anna Davin has used such contrasts in her fine-grained study, *Growing Up Poor. Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914* (Rivers Oram Press; London, 1996), to suggest that school, for many of them, was a profoundly unreal experience, one to be evaded or endured, with small impact on their values and social attitudes. Autobiographers are by definition atypical; and like those who are interviewed by oral historians, they make a composition of their lives. But a reading of, say, V.S. Pritchett's *A Cab at the Door* (Chatto & Windus; London, 1968), Harold Owen's *Journey from Obscurity* (3 vols; Oxford University Press; London, 1963-5) or Kathleen Dayus's *Her People* (Virago; London, 1982), shows how limited was the impact of school and how much greater were those of home, family and work.

* A review of Jonathan Rose's book by Donald MacRaild on this site can be reached via [this link](#) [2].

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