Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America, Australia and Britain

Review Number:
330
Publish date:
Saturday, 31 May, 2003
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ISBN:
333997468X
Date of Publication:
2002
Price:
£45.00
Pages:
264pp.
Publisher:
Palgrave
Place of Publication:
Basingstoke
Reviewer:
John Lowerson

This is an ambitious and in many respects singularly brave book which adds a further dimension to the growing understanding of middle-class life that has prompted the research of increasing numbers of historians in the last decade or so. The ambition, much of which is realised, lies in the attempt to make comparisons which cross the usual national boundaries which have restricted most social or cultural historians with the singular exception of Peter Gay's multi-volume study of European bourgeois identities. Perhaps the only other field where scholars might have laid claim to a similar width of approach has been the British Empire. Linda Young's book uses part of that empire but adds on a country which escaped from it, the United States. The common links, middle classes apart, depend on language; this is a study of anglophones and, almost by definition, anglophiles whom Young classifies somewhat broadly throughout the book as 'Anglos'. At the heart of this group were of course the emigrants and apostles who came out to these countries or sent their ideas from the homeland. This raises an immediate problem that the author rather avoids. This is a discussion mainly of the British impact on middle-class hopes and expectations but it runs the risks of being trapped in the customary translation of 'British' as 'English', not something likely to appeal particularly to the Scots or Irish whose imperial and American impact was considerable.

Two other issues need to be unpicked immediately. The first is the time span, which is flexible: not so much

the 'long nineteenth century', as a short one occasionally lengthened. Most of the emphasis is on the establishment of certain expectations and patterns of behaviour in a period roughly from the late-eighteenth century to the 1860s, which poses some problems for working out the ramifications of the further percolation of the main developments under discussion. Moving the boundaries in this way rather raises some barriers for an assessment of time lag in the local take-up of new ideas in the areas under study. The second issue also arises from the title - just what is the 'middle-class culture' we are expecting to read about? Now that 'cultural history' seems to have replaced 'social history', in many cases with little actual shift in methodology or interpretation, it can take some time to come to an understanding of what is on offer when 'culture' is not qualified in the title. This is not a book about the arts and their consumption except as fringe elements. It is instead a text dealing with material culture along some of the lines familiar in recent works on post-Renaissance Europe and raises questions about changing patterns of consumption and the objects being traded in, as well as the values they were held to represent. Linda Young is a museum specialist with a track record of studying country houses and bourgeois domestic interiors, examining the colonial context in terms of the take-up and modification of essentially English models. So a great deal of the empirical evidence in the book deals with domestic artefacts and the circumstances and expectations of their use, both in simple physical terms and as sites of ritual interchange.

Her use of 'culture' shifts meanings slightly at different points in the work, although Young usually makes the current emphasis clear. Largely responsible for this is the author's interrogation of the theoretical frameworks that inform her approach. For once, and thankfully, Foucault is not invoked. Instead there is a rigorous interrogation of Norbert Elias's *The Court Society* (trans. Edmund Jephcott: Blackwell; Oxford, 1983) and *The Civilizing Process* (2 vols, trans. Edmund Jephcott: Blackwell; Oxford, 1982); although she acknowledges somewhat uneasily the tensions in bourgeois-aristocratic relations, she criticises Elias for an overemphasis on aristocratic models. Yet she admits the place of aristocratic inspiration in both Australia, where it might just have been expected, and in the States where it was more problematic. There are some difficulties in the treatment of the 'Anglo' upper classes because of the rather taut metropolitan-outwards diffusion model that informs the study. The extent to which both British and American societies were also influenced by European shifts in taste, French-derived in particular, are rather passed over. Having said that, she is profoundly and very fruitfully influenced by Bourdieu's models of cultural consumption, particularly by his discussion of what constituted legitimacy in determining acceptable taste. Her use of his theories about 'symbolic capital' is sensitive but there are some difficulties when she refers to both artefacts and the values surrounding their acquisition and display as forming part of bourgeois 'cultural capital'. This is a somewhat different usage from that employed recently by Tracy Davis in her discussion of the export of English theatrical expertise in the later nineteenth century which may be more convincing.(1) It is perhaps an indication that cultural history is at present as raw as the societies in which Young sets her investigation; there are boundaries and definitions to be worked out as we conduct our own intellectual rituals. At times Bourdieu's 'symbolic capital' would be a rather stronger peg on which to hang her arguments than the 'cultural capital' she prefers. But her doing so does not weaken her case significantly.

Much of the book is taken up with useful and rigorous discussions of secondary literature but social ritual and the ceremonies of territory related to physical possessions provide its empirical basis. So Young describes and illustrates a whole range of goods, ranging from knives and forks to wardrobes, chamber pots and toothbrushes. Some of the strictures Thorstein Veblen uttered against conspicuous consumption are taken back into the earlier nineteenth century, but at times the book uses the sort of listings of domestic property that historians of Tudor England from forty years ago would recognise from *post mortem* inventories; the established scholarly tools are not vitiated by the interpretations to which the material is subjected. Much depends on such sources as manufacturers' catalogues and descriptions which come from the pre-railway age so there can be little discussion of the impact of such outlets as the Army and Navy stores in Britain and some of its dependencies, let alone the models offered by Sears catalogues in the United States. One of the most interesting passages concerns the physical and spatial requirements of organising a dinner party, the correct layout of eating and drinking utensils according to the extent of the meal being provided. Such issues emerge as the availability of cheap electro-plating as distinct from sterling silver; and what level of ceramic excellence was appropriate for display and emulation. The illustration used comes

from an edition of *The Footman's Handbook*, designed presumably for the professionally ambitious servant. Several possible lines of discussion spring from this, pointers for future thought rather than being explored in this book. The existence of a supposed market for footmen's industrial reading suggests great responsibility being placed on the employee rather than employer in terms of providing the ritual setting. An ecclesiastical analogy would be with the sacristan's laying out an altar for a somewhat detached senior cleric, who would then be guided through the rituals by a supposedly inferior master of ceremonies. It leaves open for discussion the issue that the senior servants in more ambitious households were themselves the arbiters of etiquette as much as their social superiors (rather as many regimental non-commissioned officers regulate the traditions of their regiments and their onwards transmission, with the commissioned frequently being regarded as not particularly competent temporary guardians). We are given some sense, particularly for Britain, of the range of income necessary for the employment of servants but it lacks the context of actual numbers to give it scale.

The invention and diffusion of domestically-based traditions is of key importance in Young's discussion of the development of etiquettes, without which the material affluence would have been little more than a utilitarian or eccentric collection of objects. Her discussion of gender relations in this process is first-rate, with the role of married women in particular seen as expressions of an acute form of social power, as the filters of what and who would prove acceptable. The idea of women as the civilising arbiters of insecure and rapidly changing social situations is crucial here because this was not so much the transmission of the norms of a settled society to distant outliers, as it was a dynamic process whose own fashion shifts raised questions about the extent to which lags in take-up were important. What is not attempted very much in this study, however, is an analysis of the possibilities of reciprocity; yet historians of, say, British India and its 'ornamentalism' have begun to realise the importance of this(2) Max Weber is called on to discuss the issues of borderline overlaps and there is an almost Gramscian consideration of how supposedly total packages of ideal domestic provision had to be adapted to fit non-London situations and slightly different local class expectations. Young sets the origins of etiquette in seventeenth-century France, as is usual, but leaves the France contemporary to her subjects to one side. One is also left asking about the rituals of Tudor and early Stuart court life. Teaching oneself manners for those who had not learned them either at the mother's or, more likely for many, upper servant's knee produced an industry that still thrives, although it is as likely to be about internet etiquette rather than about visiting acquaintances these days. Ironically, at the time of writing this review English television is broadcasting a series of 'fly-on-the-wall' programmes in which dinner parties are observed and dissected mercilessly by a pair of self-proclaimed experts (*The Dinner Party Inspectors*, Channel 4); at least early nineteenth-century hopefuls had only text or the minefields of reading body language to cope with.

Body language, or its careful control and discussion, plays a major part in Young's social rituals and here the indicators sometimes seemed confused. Nose-blowing is discussed at several points, as much in terms of the availability of spare handkerchiefs and the possibilities of cleanliness as determining social sanctification, as in health and aesthetic terms. Excretion and masturbation are also explored but it is somewhat surprising in view of feminist writing in recent decades and of the necessary development of a veiled language for making Victorian social interaction possible that menstruation is not. Body shape is also considered, particularly in terms of its modification by clothing fashions such as men's trousers and the female corset. In terms of the latter and Young's use of Veblen it is a little surprising to find no consideration of his ironic strictures on what eventually were referred to as 'foundation garments', a recognition of both bodily and social architecture. Nor is there any extended discussion of one key issue related to cleanliness and social intercourse - the often quite firm class differences indicated by body odour and the disguising as well as status-indicating role of different perfumes. The good honest sweat of the muscular Christian was certainly not acceptable in the drawing or dining room and Tracy Davis, in her discussion of the theatre, has made clear the role of social and miasmatic differentiation that the careful separation of seating played. Many late Victorian theatre programmes gave open advertising for the local firms whose products perfumed each performance.

Binding these considerations together is Young's central concept of 'gentility', used as a positive against the

mildly derogatory 'genteel'. Her usage of it is rather closer to the modern French approbation of the 'trés gentile' but there is a harder edge, relating to how gentility could be bought as much as earned or even inherited. She makes a careful distinction between gentility and 'respectable' which she identifies as a word more likely to apply to the white-collar/manual boundary groups than to her chosen middle and upper-middle classes. To a certain extent she is right, not least because it questions the respectable/rough divide that still occurs in some writings on British history. Certainly, at least at first sight, the idea of gentility melds more easily with the notion of social flux, whereas that of respectability assumes a rather greater fixity of codes and expectations than it perhaps possessed. Treated as an internal class division, her chosen concept reasserts what is also important to her argument, the assumption that social classes, described in terms of perception rather than function and structure, remain a significant focus of and tool for historical enquiry; postmodernist simplicities are sent on their way whilst the essentially fluid boundaries of her subject are given due regard.

Bourdieu is also borrowed for the locating of mannered intercourse in the 'habitus', the codes that determine behaviour and the fineness of distinctions within them. Some of the implications of this are illustrated by a very selective use of fiction, most notably *Pride and Prejudice*, where Jane Austen's irony is somewhat played down. Young's skilful use of this work does raise some issues though, not least in her assumption that that Bennett family is middle-class. Surely lesser gentry would be more appropriate and her interpretation arises perhaps from some uncertainty over the precise role of aristocratic titles; there is a confusion between 'barony', the bottom rung of the hereditary peerage and the much larger 'baronetcy'. The author is not alone in this - it was for clarifying these differences in such a raw society that the various guidebooks to aristocratic lineage and precedence were such successful products of Victorian publishers, including *Who's Who*, not mentioned here, for those who did not know who was who without looking them up. Young also uses some Dickens and the 'knife and fork' novels to make her point; it could have been strengthened even further by exploring George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, possibly the most brilliant study of social ambition and uncertainty the nineteenth century produced. Some of Trollope's wry observations would have helped as well, not least his character from *Barchester Towers*, La Signora Neroni, whose languid hogging of sofas would have fitted in beautifully with Young's discussion of the tension between illness and eroticism in portrayals of reclining women.

But to ask that would be to extend this quite short book into a much heavier work. Within its prescribed time limits and a geographical coverage that is rather more restricted than the sub-title suggests, it offers some valuable explanations and pointers for further work. Just how long etiquette revision remained dynamic whilst its codes became quite rigidly fixed within the 'respectability' of white-collar groups whose influence remained considerable until the late 1950s could be thought through in new work for which this is a sound starting base. While revision of etiquette texts continued, the main consumers of such texts did not find themselves in situations for which such etiquette directions had any validity. To give one example, *Manners and Rules of Good Society . by a Member of the Aristocracy*, which ran through many editions over nearly a century from the mid-nineteenth, was updated to cope with such new activities as private cinema shows in country houses. Yet this was something quite alien to the majority of its readers; similarly how did the servants cope? Perhaps we should be told. This book, with its study of a form of globalization that predates the current assumption that it is necessarily a form of American dumbing-down, will help those whose research is now turning to the field of daily life as a new and rich seam for cultural history to engage with.

Notes

1. Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge 2000). Back to (1)
2. David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism* (Allen Lane: London, 2001). For a review of this book on these pages, please click here [2].Back to (2)

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