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Making English Morals: Voluntary Association And Moral Reform In England, 1787-1886

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Middle-class reform initiatives have long fascinated historians of Georgian and Victorian Britain. Some took their cue from the radical critique embodied in William Cobbett's contemporary attack on the 'Subscription Tribe', who gave charity soup kitchens but denied political rights.⁽¹⁾ Thus the Hammonds inveighed in 1917 against evangelical benevolence as the 'conscience of the rich' which legitimated the 'toleration of abuses and cruelties'.⁽²⁾ Similar suspicions ran through the literature of the 1970s, with its emphasis on the exertion of social control through the medium of educational charity and the reform of popular leisure. Others viewed such enterprises not through the spectacles of class conflict but rather as representative of an emerging social consensus, manifested, for example, in the temperance movement or the churches' social mission: voluntary associations were therefore a formative element of the mid-Victorian 'peacable kingdom'.⁽³⁾ In the last twenty years various trends have converged to sustain and further this interest. Welfare historians have increasingly turned away from linear narratives of state advance to reinstate the 'moving frontier' between state and voluntary sector as an ongoing and integral element of social reform.⁽⁴⁾ Urban historians have conducted studies of provincial towns which show how institutions of civil society could both enact social cleavage and ensure stability by creating economic and social networks. Meanwhile those concerned with the making of middle-class identity have shown how the new subscription associations were key to the forging of social and gender norms.

M. J. D. Roberts's *Making English Morals* is an important new contribution to this literature, aiming as it

does for the type of synthesis achieved in the work of scholars such as Peter Clarke on early modern clubs and societies, Frank Prochaska on philanthropy and R. J. Morris on voluntary association. Its distinctive feature is a close focus on a particular field of activity - moral reform. Roberts defines his subject using the self-delineation of the temperance movement: that is, as something distinct from educational, medical and eleemosynary charity, as well as from religious evangelising and from partisan political association. In practice this means not just opposition to drink, but also societies for the prosecution of vice, the promotion of sabbatarianism and social purity, the prevention of cruelty to children and animals and the organisation, rather than the transmission, of charity. Of course, this choice of themes cannot hope to catch all the ways in which moral reform voluntarism sought to mould values and behaviour. Such motives surely inspired other kinds of philanthropists and proselytisers, from the sponsors of the most modest Dorcas society or day school to the patrons of the grandest voluntary hospital. Nor, as Roberts hints in his discussions of the Sunday and National School movements, can the persons who supported 'moral reform', narrowly defined, be easily distinguished from the subscribing publics which sustained other local charities and cultural institutions, given the networks of church, chapel and party which undergirded so much social action.

This however would make for a potentially limitless field, and the virtue of Roberts' selection strategy is that it allows him to provide a coherent narrative over a long period. It also permits a detailed analysis of the leadership of the movement, on which he builds a fine-grained account of the context in which different initiatives arose. As the title indicates, the study is organised as a chronological survey with two bookends looking backwards and forwards. It begins in 1787, with the work of William Wilberforce and the inauguration of the Proclamation Society, though this prompts a retrospective glance at the 1680s in search of its precursors, the Societies for the Reformation of Manners. It concludes in 1886, a year of political change in which the broadened franchise and the Liberal defeat spelt the end of hopes that moral reformers might influence mainstream politics. The narrative closes with some reflections on a future in which institutions of civil society were less able to shape public discourse.

There are several interrelated elements to the book's conceptual framework. Perhaps most importantly, Roberts achieves a synthesis of past and present approaches to the use of class as an explanatory factor. First, he rejects a reductionist view of moral reform as the cultural superstructure of economic identity, treating the practices of association rather as 'independent variables capable of shaping moral discourses' (p. 14). Second, however, he stresses throughout that a key impulse for reformers was the tension generated by the market society which was coming into being. At particular junctures and for particular individuals this was manifested in different ways: sometimes as the 'psychic strain' of the 'precarious social rank' of the nouveaux riches (pp. 40-1); sometimes as anxiety about the effects of consumer capitalism on patterns of leisure (for example the deleterious temptations of the brewing industry (p. 98), or the undermining of Sabbath observance by the railways (p. 116)); sometimes as capitalist guilt prompting a compensatory rhetoric of 'stewardship' (p. 128), and so on. There are two further organising themes. Roberts uses the long history of moral reform initiatives as a case study with which to explore Jurgen Habermas's account of the rise and structural transformation of the public sphere. He sees in the discourses and public representation of these voluntary societies the empirical substance of Habermas's ideal of 'rational-critical debate'. Moreover, the process by which voluntary initiative was superseded by state agency and the professionalisation of social work illustrates the disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere in the later nineteenth century. Roberts is also alert to the concerns of theorists of civil society. The key influence is the North American political scientist, Robert Putnam, who has postulated, based on the experience of the US and Italy, that a vigorous culture of societies and associations is vital to a healthy democracy, since such activities cultivate the habits of participation, embed procedures of collective organisation, and instil support for transparent public debate. Moral reform voluntarism offers a prism through which to view all these issues.

With respect to methodology, Roberts identifies for analysis a number of associations which illustrate the principal themes of the period he has under review. He draws on their published reports to establish how their aims and assumptions were articulated, and pays close attention to the personal circumstances of their leaders, whose economic position and social networks yield insight into the wellsprings of reform. Personal papers, autobiographies and published writings are used to dissect their emotional lives, beliefs and

motivation. Among these individuals are some familiar names, such as William Wilberforce, Lord Shaftesbury, Josephine Butler and Elizabeth Fry. However many lesser known individuals also feature: Henry Budd, founder member of the Vice Society and chaplain of Bridewell Hospital, driven both by religious duty and his ambition to network with the influential; or Peter Bedford, the Quaker silk merchant in Spitalfields whose post-1815 work with delinquent youths provided him with 'a surrogate family of dependants over which to preside' (p. 125); or Joseph Livesey, the self-made newspaper man whose activism in the mid-century temperance movement was inspired by a desire to spread the gospel of improvement to his peers. Careers such as these can most tellingly illuminate the impulses of social action. That said, it must be stressed that this pursuit of 'representative' and articulate individuals is preferred to an analysis of ordinary supporters. While there is a certain amount of prosopographical work on leaders (e.g. pp. 38-40) there is little reference to the characteristics of lesser activists and supporters, and the milieux from which they sprang; instead the accent is very much on the thoughts and deeds of the elite.

Opening his account in the 1780s, Roberts consciously aligns his narrative with a familiar chronology of modernisation, emphasising the destabilising effects of rapid population growth, urbanisation and the coming of a national market society. This was the context in which fears of a 'moral crisis' emerged well before the spectre of revolutionary France was in sight. Licentious behaviour, criminality and subversive publications were the targets of the Proclamation Society which lobbied for the more active prosecution of transgressors, while the Philanthropic Society favoured the removal and institutionalisation of the children of the 'vicious'. Analysing the make-up of the leadership Roberts finds an alliance of aspiring members of the commercial and professional middle class and gentlemen of conscience. The next chapter turns to the war years, 1795-1815, which are marked by a distinct change of trend. Military mobilisation destabilised society and undermined ties of deference, while economic disruption exacerbated problems of disorder and the allure of Jacobin ideas raised fears of godlessness. This was the spur to a revival of efforts of metropolitan and provincial elites, manifested for example in the Society for the Suppression of Vice, to support tougher application of the law as a bulwark against indiscipline. Another innovation was the range of relief schemes promoted in years of economic crisis, which combined soup kitchens with a more discriminating use of charity, entailing enquiry and domestic visiting. The hitherto ecumenical nature of moral reform also gave way in this period to a clearer delineation between establishment and dissenting projects, as patriotism was aligned with religious orthodoxy. Increasingly it was London's business and professional classes rather than the gentry which furnished the personnel of associations. Though some were driven by the 'spiritual anguish and emotional discomfort' (p. 83) arising from labour market position, and others by a sense of duty, all were inspired by a sense of their moral superiority to those both above and below them on the social scale: a 'sense of middle-class consciousness and self-assertion' (p. 85) fostered by the war years.

Chapter 3 is tellingly entitled 'Taming the masses', and identifies the period between the end of the war and the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act as a distinct phase in which moral reform voluntarism flowered. There were various reasons for this: the example of evangelical missions dissolved the barriers to co-operation between church and chapel, while concern with reform of public administration prompted experimentation in the areas of policing and management of the poor. Moreover, as 'the free market came into its own,' (p. 96) so fears of moral decay manifested in drink, religious apathy and commercial leisure, were heightened. Roberts argues that the ensuing proliferation of voluntary associations represented the 'triumphant completion of the middle-class mission' (p. 141), as the reform agenda mapped out in the 1780s was 'unpacked' into specialist groupings. Characteristic ventures of the time were societies for the suppression of begging and brothel-keeping, the reclamation of prostitutes, prison reform, prevention of cruelty to animals, and of course, the abolition of slavery. The political and economic crises of the late 1820s and early 1830s were particularly important, prompting the foundation of the British and Foreign Temperance Society and the Lord's Day Observance Society. This was the period in which an 'identifiably continuous moral reform tradition may be said to have emerged' (p. 142), yet the bases of its support and the legitimacy of its self-appointed leaders remained uncertain. These issues are brought to the fore in the following section, which discusses the years 1834 to 1857. With matters such as policing, slavery and the poor law resolved by the reform settlement of the Whig governments a new era began in which moral reformers concentrated on the temperance campaign, the ragged school movement and the prevention of

prostitution. However, fissures within the class project were becoming apparent, in the denominational divisions in educational and visiting charities and in the proselytising missions, and in the more explicitly political campaigns which drained support. More seriously, by the 1850s the evangelical activists were on the receiving end of criticism from more secular and commercial interests. The context for this was the impending conflict between the campaigning and petitioning activities of voluntarists and the nascent processes of parliamentary democracy: how representative were the self-appointed moral champions? Hotly contested issues such as Sunday trading and the suppression of the drink trade were focal points for debates on the limits of the state's right to curb individual liberty in the name of moral improvement.

In the mid-Victorian phase (1857-1880) many of the anxieties about disorder were fading, as economic growth and a more controlled urban environment allayed fears. Now the key problem for reformers was to foster the autonomous moral individual within a market society, and this guided the activities of temperance supporters, rescuers of fallen women, visitors to workhouses and the 'moral disciplinarians' (p. 209) of the Charity Organisation Society (COS). It was also the period in which mass democratic politics emerged, and with it the continuing expansion of state power in the social realm. This brought new opportunities such as the COS's attempt to co-ordinate its volunteer casework with poor law policy. But there were also challenges, and here Roberts aligns his account with the Habermasian paradigm, as he shows how moral reformers came into conflict with the state-approved professionals who increasingly guided policy, for example in the rows over the Contagious Diseases Acts and vivisection. The final substantive chapter argues that by the 1880s the transformation of the public sphere of reform voluntarism was complete. Activists now sought to achieve their goals through lobbying government, but even where successful (such as the outlawing of child prostitution in the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act), doubts remained as to whether reliance on the state undermined individual moral responsibility. And tying their fortunes closely to a political party, as temperance campaigners did with the Liberals, could leave reformers exposed if politicians decided such single-issue causes had become electorally disadvantageous. More importantly, as the imperative of guarding national economic efficiency directed the interests of the state towards social welfare, so moral reformers, with their localist approach and their commitment to individual and family reclamation, were marginalised. With professional elites now oriented towards social rather than moral causes of poverty and deviancy, the late-Victorian voluntarists failed to transmit their tradition to a new generation.

The major achievement of this book is to provide a nuanced and extraordinarily erudite account of the forces which brought into being this form of voluntary action. Though presented under the banner of cultural history, Roberts has deftly explicated the formative role of political events on the arena in which reformers functioned, and shown the decisive importance of economic forces in impelling their engagement. The chronology he presents is compelling and deserves to become a benchmark account for future researchers. One qualification has already been mentioned though, and that is the potential pitfall of discussing moral reform in isolation from the broader currents of philanthropic and cultural association, which were arguably all facets of the same middle-class project. For example, the moralising agenda which Mary Fissell noticed in the Georgian voluntary hospitals or the civilising mission which Helen Meller observed in the efforts of Victorian urban elites to provide facilities for leisure and recreation, cannot be easily severed from this story.(5) The book also makes an important contribution to the historical literature on the public sphere, and Roberts' analysis should be read alongside Geoff Eley's critical discussion of Habermas's ideal-typical account.(6) Of particular interest is the argument here that moral reform provided the opportunity for articulate women to retain a public platform at a time when formal democratic procedures conspired to exclude them.

Where the summation is rather less convincing, however, is on the evaluation of the reformers' impact on their unwitting subjects. The assumption that moral reform 'at the very least eased the transition' (p. 294) to a more polite and respectable society is not supported by the book's original research, which has little to say on the practical achievement (or lack of it) of the associations under consideration. True, there is some discussion of the limited success of the Proclamation and Vice Societies (pp. 66, 77) and of the transitory nature of anti-slavery sentiment (pp. 132-3) but in the main Roberts relies on secondary sources for his evaluation of outcomes. And, as Robert Humphries showed in his exploration of the gulf between the

rhetoric and practice of the COS, the administrative and financial realities lurking in provincial minute books may have been far removed from the high-flown ambitions of the metropolitan elites who people this book. Similarly, it is plausible enough to claim that 'moral reform movements made a significant contribution to the emergence of a society capable of debating issues in a way which led neither to violent confrontation nor to coercion' (p. 295). But how exactly can the degree of this contribution be calibrated when set against other forms of associational activity? Consider for example John Garrard's recent reflections on the role of the working-class friendly society in nurturing an appetite for democratic procedures.⁽⁷⁾ That said, Roberts has no intention of marshalling these arguments behind the cause of 'reinventing' civil society in the present day. Ultimately the story he tells is of an 'historically specific phase in cultural adjustment' (p. 298), and is not meant as a timeless exemplar of the potential of the third sector. This is a salutary conclusion for those who would invoke greater voluntary engagement as a panacea for the contemporary welfare state.

Notes

1. *Political Register*, 3 Nov. 1816. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Town Labourer* (1917; 1978 edn), p.154. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For example, Brian Harrison, *Peacable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 217-59. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Geoffrey Finlayson, *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain 1830-1990* (Oxford, 1994). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Mary E. Fissell, *Patients, Power, and the Poor in Eighteenth Century Bristol* (Cambridge, 1991); H. E. Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City, 1870-1914* (1976). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. G. Eley, 'Nations, publics and public cultures: placing Habermas in the nineteenth century', in *Culture, Power, History: a Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. N. Dirks, G. Eley and S. Ortner (Princeton, NJ, 1994), pp. 297-335. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. John Garrard, *Democratisation in Britain: Elites, Civil Society and Reform since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2001). [Back to \(7\)](#)

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