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The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past 1800–1953

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The use of the past in previous eras has become a growth area of historical enquiry in recent times, exemplified by the enormous Cambridge University project, 'Past Versus Present: Abandoning the Past in an Age of Progress', on the Victorians' relationship to the past. Historians have been particularly interested in the development of a notion of a 'national' past, and the light this throws on national identity. Billie Melman's *The Culture of History* is an ambitious and revisionist contribution to this work, which not only challenges accepted accounts of how the English have constructed and remembered their past, but which also wrestles bravely with some of the core challenges of writing cultural history: notably the interplay between 'images and representations' and 'material lives and bodies' (p. 330), and the relationship between the forms and subjectivities of popular culture and the social, economic, and political developments which she collectively describes as 'big change'.

At the outset, Melman notes areas of consensus in the existing historiography which she intends to challenge, particularly the idea that the English saw their past as characterized by unusual stability, that this was linked to confidence in national institutions, and that the past was envisaged as essentially rural. Instead, she posits the existence of an alternative view of the past as urban, violent, and disturbing, a view which had an uneasy co-existence alongside the cosy nostalgia for a rural and egalitarian 'Merrie England' identified, among others, by Peter Mandler (1). In particular, she focuses on the Tudor and late-Georgian periods (particularly the French Revolution) as providing especially unsettling views of the past. Moreover, while other historians have thought of 'history' primarily as a tool of social control, Melman's stated aim is to allow more scope for individual agency, by taking 'a close look at the layers and percolations of practices,

uses, and the meanings given by individuals to the past more than at an inventory of structures of manipulation' (p. 10).

To achieve this goal, Melman deliberately eschews the kind of history disseminated by the educated elite and focuses instead on a nascent popular culture of history that was quintessentially metropolitan, and facilitated by the rapid spread of literacy as well as the emergence of new technologies of 'seeing' the past, such as the panorama and the motion picture. Her definition of 'popular' as denoting 'a cross-class exchange between and through different yet interacting genres' (p. 12) is an elegant solution to the problem of distinguishing between 'high' and 'low' culture, while her emphasis on the two-way nature of that exchange allows her to consider productions which might not otherwise have been thought of as relating to popular culture at all, such as Carlyle's *French Revolution* or Britten's 1953 coronation opera *Gloriana*. This exchange of ideas and imagery between different types of cultural production is just one of four 'modalities' in the 'two-way travel of histories between their producers and consumers' (p. 20) which Melman identifies as being recurrent themes throughout the book. The others are, first, the ways in which the less educated compensated for their unequal access to information about the past by incorporating historic artefacts, sites, and stories into narratives which resonated with their own experiences; second, the increasing democratization of history over the period, which she relates to the advance of political reform as well as the emergence of the mass media in the early-twentieth century; and, third, the possibility of the creation of a 'national' history—a possibility that Melman accepts in line with existing historiography on national identity, but which she complicates through her examination of the *inter*nationalism of many of the producers of popular history, from Madame Tussaud in the early-nineteenth century to the multi-national film crews who brought the Tudors to English cinema audiences between the wars.

Melman's method is to take a particular production (a novel, a historical site such as the Tower of London, or a film) and to explore its themes and the ways in which the consumers of that production (readers, visitors, or viewers) responded to it and inscribed their own meanings upon it. The result is a work brimming with insight and interest, though at the expense of appearing occasionally disjointed. To give it more coherence, the book is divided into five thematic sections. Part one comprises three chapters exploring different representations of the French Revolution, and it is here that the theme of the past as a dangerous and unsettling place is developed. Chapter one looks at the importance of Madame Tussaud's as a site where audiences of different classes were exposed to a particular view of the French Revolution in which the guillotine held centre stage. Melman argues that the juxtaposition of the guillotined heads of the victims of the Terror alongside notorious British criminals such as Burke and Hare in what came to be known as the 'Chamber of Horrors', created an imaginative connection between criminality and political violence and catered for a popular desire to encounter history as a location of 'horror', which, 'constituted a set of attitudes and sensations in which repulsion, apprehension, and fear combined with attraction and delight' (p. 31). The revolutionaries themselves, particularly Robespierre, were portrayed as inhuman monsters, in stark contrast to the figure of Napoleon, displayed elsewhere, who was integrated into a narrative of British military achievement in symbiosis with Wellington.

In chapters two and three, Melman compares the accounts of the revolution in Carlyle's *French Revolution* and Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* (1859) respectively, contrasting Carlyle's 'panoramic' view of the action which places the reader in elevated observation points, with Dickens' 'street level' account, although both situate the revolution as a quintessentially urban event. The common thread in each work is the disturbing nature of the revolutionary crowd as a historical actor in its own right—a view which takes on a specifically gendered dimension for Carlyle, whose anarchic female revolutionaries personified the collapse of state order. Melman links Dickens's fascination with the guillotine as the focal point of a dark and dangerous urban landscape, and particularly with the unruly crowds who gathered to see it in action, with the author's disquiet about the moral effects of public executions in mid-century Britain. Using Gattrell's work on the gallows, she argues that state violence in the form of execution was a key part of the urban experience, and provided a direct link in the popular imagination between mid-nineteenth century England and the violence of France's recent past (2).

In Part II, Melman explores the theme of 'History as Dungeon', looking first at the emergence of the Tower

of London as a national historic monument, and shedding light on the contemporary debates over visitor access to the Tower. She focuses in particular on working-class east-enders who saw the Tower as part of 'their' inheritance and the ongoing attempts of the authorities to limit and control admittance. However, continuing her theme of history as horror, Melman notes the increasing fascination with the Tower as a place of incarceration, and its reconceptualization as a 'dungeon' rather than as an arsenal or a collection of antiquities, largely as a result of W. H. Ainsworth's novel *The Tower of London* (1839–40). This theme is developed in a chapter on Lady Jane Grey, whose passivity reflected early-Victorian ideals of womanhood more closely than the more problematic Elizabeth I. Melman argues that the early Victorians' fascination with this unfortunate woman not only gave a specifically gendered dimension to visions of the dungeon, power, and the state, but also helped to domesticate and 'feminize' the image of the dungeon in the early 1840s, and so made 'horror' more respectable and less subversive. Lady Jane's cross-class appeal as innocent and virtuous victim of masculine ambition and state violence is contrasted with the plebeian enthusiasm for the life of executed prison-breaker Jack Sheppard in the 1830s, whose tumultuous life seemed to reflect contemporary social upheaval and insecurity.

In the second half of the book, Melman shifts her focus to the early-twentieth century, and in particular to film as the primary popular medium for historical culture. In chapters six and seven she examines the popularity of films about the Tudor monarchy, particularly the portrayal of Elizabeth I in *Fire Over England* starring Flora Robson and *Henry VIII* starring Charles Laughton, while in chapter eight she returns to the French Revolution with an examination of the popularity of Baroness Orczy's creation *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, which quickly progressed from popular play to novel and, eventually, to the screen. These chapters offer fascinating insights into the role of film stars themselves as interpreters of history to the public, with Robson striving to give a more 'authentic' rendition of Elizabeth's role at Tilbury for instance, while Melman is able to bring out the sophistication of film audiences in making judgements about historical accuracy, despite the fears of the Historical Association about the corrosive effects of glamorized accounts of the past on the public's understanding of the 'national' history. However, the nub of Melman's argument in these later chapters is the foregrounding, from the late-nineteenth century onwards, of a more comforting notion of the past as a place of security and comfort (p. 186). From being associated with corruption, arbitrary power, and state violence in the early-nineteenth century, the person of the monarch had been depoliticized and could now be seen as symbolic of freedom and stability, particularly in the face of a deteriorating international situation. Moreover, the portrayal of past monarchs by modern film stars accompanied the growing celebrity status of the royal family themselves, with the emphasis on domestic detail in historical films reflecting the insatiable curiosity about the private lives of living royals. This more comforting view of the past is seen to reveal itself most tellingly in the popularity of the Scarlet Pimpernel, the archetype of twentieth-century heroes from Zorro to James Bond. Again, the glamorization of the aristocracy that the Pimpernel embodied is seen to accompany the depoliticization of the aristocracy themselves in the early-twentieth century (p. 250), an interesting insight with echoes of the historical memorialization of other previously problematic groups such as the Scottish Highlanders in the nineteenth century (3). In the meantime, she contends that the idea of the crowd as an important historical force in its own right fades from the stage.

In her final chapter, Melman identifies fundamental shifts in the culture of history that she has described, including the advent of television, and the emergence of the state as a 'cultural broker' following the foundation of the Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts (1942), which gave way to the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1945. However, the main focus of the chapter is Benjamin Britten's opera *Gloriana*, written for the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953. Produced against the backdrop of exuberant proclamations of a second Elizabethan age, Britten's creation proved highly controversial. Focussing on the ageing Elizabeth I's tempestuous and ultimately doomed relationship with the earl of Essex, the opera's musical dissonances underlined the potentially-subversive messages of the opera itself, which seemed to run counter to the prevailing official narratives of youth, confidence, and rebirth.

There are so many perceptive arguments in this richly-analytical book that it is impossible to do them justice here. Particularly valuable are Melman's accounts of the ways in which the 'consumers' of the culture of

history inscribed their own meanings and interpretations onto the productions of that culture. She utilizes a range of sources to that end, from the life stories that workhouse boys related to Henry Mayhew to the accounts of film goers in the Mass Observation archive. Ingeniously, Melman has even used the 'Friends Reunited' website to track down Londoners who had visited the Tower of London as schoolchildren in the 1930s, to ask them about their impressions. There are many fascinating insights here into the way that ordinary people constructed their own sense of the past from the materials around them, ranging from monuments to match-boxes, and also their capacity for arriving at subversive readings even of supposedly-conservative texts (the ability of some nineteenth-century feminists to take inspiration from the more misogynistic passages of Carlyle's *French Revolution* is particularly telling). However, the picture is necessarily fragmentary, and leaves much further work to be done in recovering the popular meanings of the past.

It seems legitimate to conclude by asking how far Melman succeeds in her aim of tying developments in popular culture to what she terms 'big change', specifically change 'in political structures, Britain's position as an empire and world power, and urbanization and technologies of communication' (p. 326). This is an ambitious programme, and Melman herself admits that the study is incomplete. Much of the analysis is convincing, particularly her model of the 'accretion', as new ways of seeing the past become grafted on to the representations provided by older technologies and narrative forms. Her suggestion that early-nineteenth-century authors' views of the disturbing power of the revolutionary crowd were connected to disquiet over contemporary social unrest is plausible, as is her argument that the projection of the past as a dangerous and specifically *urban* place can be linked to contemporary upheavals and 'improvements' which were changing, if not totally erasing, the historical face of major nineteenth-century cities, including London. On the other hand, Melman's schematic linkage of the decline of this subversive view of history to a progressive accommodation between the state and the 'people' through successive reform acts seems too tidily mono-causal and requires further elaboration. The liberal state remained suspicious of the crowd well after the point at which Melman identifies important shifts in the focus of the 'culture of history', and the social tensions of the 1930s were no less profound in their way than those of the 1830s. Moreover, as Patrick Joyce has demonstrated, any accommodation between state and people in the nineteenth century has to be set in the context of ever more elaborate technologies of urban governance (4). However, perhaps the problem is not so much that Melman downplays the social instability of the early twentieth-century, as that she overplays the insecurities of the early nineteenth. In this context the role of 'horror', which Melman argues had a central place in the nineteenth-century culture of history, needs to be theorized and explored much more fully. One could argue that the psychological attraction of 'horror' as entertainment, whether in the form of a public hanging or a visit to the Chamber of Horrors, lies in the underlying conviction of one's own security as a spectator: the *representation* of the Terror fascinates precisely because the *reality* happened in another time, in another place, and to someone else.

The Culture of History is therefore best seen as part of a work in progress, albeit one that succeeds in challenging and disrupting existing orthodoxies and consensuses. Melman has contrived to produce a complex and unsettling account of popular culture that will stimulate a lively debate over the ways in which English history was constructed and understood in the past, and the way in which those narratives were impacted upon by changing technologies and contemporary economic and political developments. In doing so, she has blazed a trail that others will undoubtedly follow.

Notes

1. For example, P. Mandler, '"In the Olden Time": Romantic history and English national identity, 1820–50', in *A Union of Multiple Identities: The British Isles c. 1750– c. 1850*, ed. L. Brockliss and D. Eastwood (Manchester, 1997). Back to (1)
2. V. A. C. Gattrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770–1868* (Oxford, 1996). Back to (2)
3. H. Trevor-Roper, 'The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Cambridge, 1983). Back to (3)

4. P. Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (New York, 2003). Back to (4)

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