

A Mans Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England

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Anthony Fletcher

John Tosh's book is a signal event. It celebrates the full coming of age of the history of masculinity as a recognised academic sub-discipline. If Davidoff and Hall laid the foundations in this respect, Tosh finally establishes and opens up the field. The book will be of great interest to all serious students of Victorian England; it will also appeal to those with an interest in modern gender studies, since, as the publishers roundly and convincingly assert, in exposing the contradictions in their own ideal of masculinity, the Victorians defined the climate for gender politics in the next century. The book represents a considerable research effort. Tosh has read widely in the family records of the period and in its advice literature. His account is much enlivened by seven carefully chosen case studies. The men concerned include an attorney, an exciseman, a doctor, a mill owner, a banker and a headmaster. The structure is explicit and persuasive as a framework for a telling argument: in Tosh's scheme of things Victorian Domesticity had preconditions, a climax between c.1830 and 1880, and a period when it fell under strain in the last thirty years of the century. The plan is neat; the book is very well written; in broad terms the analysis is flawless. It has to be said that in the end it is an argument about the rise and fall of an ideology more than a fully chartered way of life. The focus is on middle-class men and the basis in primary material is too narrow to sustain a comprehensive account of fatherhood and lived masculinity in the period. But that would be an enormous project and this book, as it stands, is genuinely pioneering. Where it digs into personal experience it is always illuminating and the constant sense of interplay between the experience and prescriptive material is always in the author's mind.

It is a mark of the excitement the book generates that it leaves tantalising questions. Where are the boundaries, if indeed they exist, between the practices of middle-class masculinity and upper-class, or for that matter working-class masculinity? How far is the connection between class and gender, so famously delineated by Davidoff and Hall, a bringing together of two necessary categories of analysis that must stand together? Tosh has enough to do covering his subject succinctly in less than 200 pages without tackling such issues head on. His central concern, in a roundabout way, is really personal identity: the declaration that home life became at this time a manifestation of gender is his centrepiece and he brilliantly establishes that. Never before or since, he insists, has domesticity been held to be so central to masculinity. The words are chosen with care. For it would take massive research to show that in practice domesticity has been more or less central since 1900 and it may never be possible to establish whether or not it was earlier than 1830. Domesticity is after all an ideological product and the relationship between such ideology and lived experience is hard to disentangle. What we know of seventeenth or eighteenth century parents suggests an intensity of love, affection, even idolisation, of their children that is authentic even if it lacks the Victorian gloss that followed romanticism and the sacralisation of the child.

The chapter on Father and Child is one of the most important and challenging in the book. It deserves particular attention. Tosh paints the Victorian father as under a formidable catalogue of pressures: he faces all the exigencies of being the breadwinner; he is expected to protect his weak dependants from the harsh realities of a corrupt world; he is still a figure of authority yet his wife has stolen much of his thunder as the newly proclaimed guardian of moral and spiritual values in the home; with the romanticisation of the child his disciplinary role in beating his children, an utmost expression of patriarchy, is under question. Tosh is very good at stating these contradictions and dilemmas. He is necessarily tentative in answering them. We are given a plausible structure of argument: absent father, tyrannical father (the stereotype), distant father and intimate father. The first is seen as the exception rather than the rule, the second is virtually dismissed with one case study from the divorce courts, the last is nicely illustrated by the case of the Lincolnshire farmer Cornelius Stovin. This leaves the third type, the distant father and distance is presented as the likely response exhibited by men confused about their role and under strain. Responsibility holds them back, they lack easy confidence with their children, whereas the intimate father praised, laughed and romped. There is a real historical conundrum here and where Tosh's book falls down is that he simply does not have the range of evidence we need to establish the real pattern of practice in Victorian fatherhood with complete confidence.

Or to put it another way, here is a fruitful field for future research. The second central chapter on Boys into Men is more convincing overall because the analysis rests on much previous work by others and it successfully contextualises this in relation to domesticity. The central issue is why the upper middle class at least colonised the expanding public schools. Tosh's reason is logical and drastic in view of what he has argued up to this point. They could not prepare sons for this world on their own; they simply lacked the resources to do so. How much easier it was to send boys away to have manliness instilled by a course of standing on your own feet, whatever the attendant bullying and with someone else doing the beating through the submission to which the boy was hardened into bearing pain with no show of emotion and no mother to run to. Tosh is excellent on the significance of the public school ban on points of female emotional reference.

In this fine book Tosh has blasted the negative and simplified images of the Victorian family. His conclusion reflects interestingly about the dynamic between the home and masculinity which the Victorians set up and which has continued throughout this century. The book should be read by all who are alert to such matters. It cannot be definitive because the ground is in many respects so new. But it is hugely readable, deeply pondered and very important.

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[2]

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