

Men's History, Gender History, or Cultural History?

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Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Industrializing America* (Routledge, 2001), pp. 256. ISBN 0 415 91786 7 (hb) and 0 415 91787 5 (pb).

Martin A. Berger, *Man Made: Thomas Eakins and the Construction of Gilded Age Manhood* (University of California Press, 2000), pp. 182. ISBN 0 520 22208 3 (hb) and 0 520 22209 1 (pb).

Matthew Basso, Laura McCall and Dee Garceau (eds), *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West* (Routledge, 2001), pp. 304. ISBN 0 415 92470 7 (hb) and 0 415 92471 5 (pb).

In 1996, Bruce Dorsey published a sample syllabus entitled 'History of Manhood in America, 1750-1920'.¹ Dorsey's syllabus marked an important juncture in the emerging field of 'men's history' – the moment, indeed, when scholarship seemed to be achieving sufficient critical mass to constitute a distinct and abiding field. While 'men's studies' originated in the brittleness of the Reaganite and Thatcherite 1980s, by 1996 enough historical monographs had accumulated on the bookshelf to enable Dorsey to design a 'men's history' course meant to complement the standard fare of women's history courses.² What has happened, the question may be asked, to the state of the field since then?

The three books under review plug some of the gaps riddling the field of men's history, and they join a wave of new monographs and essay collections published since 1996. At the very least, we now have more thorough chronological coverage of men's history, spanning late antiquity and the medieval period, through to the early modern and modern eras.³ We also have more comprehensive social coverage, encompassing both hegemonic masculinities and subaltern masculinities.⁴ Sufficient scholarship has been accumulating on both sides of the Atlantic for us to begin to make more transnational comparisons, especially between England and the United States.⁵ Each of the three books under review is strictly a national study, however.

Shawn Johansen draws upon a research base of 110 white middle-class Protestant families to examine the history of fatherhood in the northern United States east of the Mississippi River between 1800 and 1860. He organises his monograph by tracing fathers and children at each phase in their joint passage through life: a man's career and marriage; his wife's pregnancy and their children's birth; fatherhood during children's infancy and early childhood; and

then fatherhood during children's adolescence and transition to adulthood. Johansen's book is replete with details of fathers' active involvement in domesticity throughout the life course of their children. Even if, as Johansen briskly concedes, the prescriptive literature of the era trumpeted motherhood much more than it did fatherhood, men did not yield the domestic space entirely to women. Rejecting any declension narrative, Johansen argues for the historical continuity of paternal domesticity carrying over from the eighteenth into the nineteenth century.

Holding together Johansen's life-cycle account of fatherhood is an analytical concern with 'separate spheres', which serves principally as a paradigm to be overthrown. Johansen draws his evidence exclusively from personal writings because he believes that reliance upon prescriptive literature has fallaciously ensnared scholars within a 'separate spheres' paradigm. However, the 'separate spheres' paradigm is at this point rather a 'straw man' already overthrown in previous rounds of scholarship.⁶ Ironically, Johansen's preoccupation with 'separate spheres' mires him in the very framework he seeks to overthrow, since much of his own evidence begrudges a significant transfer of paternal authority to maternal authority in the home. Johansen contributes what he repeatedly calls 'complexity' to such a decline-of-fatherhood narrative (see, for example, pp. 44, 63, 86, 107, 168), demonstrating primarily that the transfer of authority from father to mother was only partial – and not total – in the nineteenth century.

This is not unlike the argument of Stephen Frank in his 1998 monograph, *Life With Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century American North*. Johansen is in the awkward position of following on the heels of Frank's well-received book, and the difference of interpretation between the two books is minimal. Both seek to overthrow the 'separate spheres' paradigm; both succeed in doing so. Frank's strategy is to compare prescriptive literature against private writings, whereas Johansen chooses to rely exclusively upon private writings in order to foreground what he characterises as 'actual fathering behaviors' (p. 3). Such a conceptualisation overlooks the representational nature of private writings, themselves at some remove from actual experience, permitting Johansen to add mostly texture and nuance to a familiar story.

Maurice Berger examines an early phase in the rollercoaster career of one man, the artist Thomas Eakins (1844–1916) based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Forgoing systematic biography, Berger employs Eakins and his paintings in the service of a cultural study of the Gilded Age in the United States. Focusing so intensively on one man enables Berger to focus precisely on the tension between prescription and practice sidestepped in Johansen's monograph. Berger scrutinises not only how Eakins deployed codes of masculinity prevailing in the culture around him, but also how his paintings contributed alternative codes of masculinity to that culture.

Berger has chosen his subject well, since Eakins spent the late nineteenth century navigating his way among shifting codes of masculinity as he grappled with the pitfalls of life. During the 1870s, Eakins painted canvases of athletic men as a means of reinforcing his own masculinity, fragile because he had avoided military service in the Civil War, was unmarried and still living in his parents' home, and worked in a profession associated with effeminacy. While the paintings appropriated prevailing codes of masculinity for Eakins's own reassurance, they also contributed to a new cultural trend valorising leisure rather than work as a site of masculine display. In other canvases, Eakins sought to expand

acceptable codes of masculinity beyond athletic virility, as in the ruminative *Chess Players* (1876). Whether appropriating codes of masculinity, or striving to reshape them, Eakins often stood as an outsider at odds with his culture. In the 1890s, recovering from a new round of personal setbacks, Eakins turned once again to canvases of athletic men such as the small-time boxer in *Salutat* (1898). His personal misfortunes were now more closely aligned with the pervasive anxieties of many men in the Gilded Age, an era in which the ascendancy of business corporations in American society increasingly compromised traditional notions of masculine independence. Marginalised artist, small-time boxer, corporate pawn – they all struggled to fulfil simply the baseline expectations of manhood.

Berger's account of Eakins is deft, always locating his subject uneasily both outside and within his cultural milieu. The Epilogue, however, pays short shrift to the theoretical implications and historical conclusions of Berger's analysis. Art historians rightly chide historians who deploy visual evidence merely as illustrations, and thus it would have been helpful for Berger to have concluded his monograph with a stronger case for what visual evidence can reveal that other kinds of historical evidence cannot. At junctures in his monograph, he generously cites the arguments of historians, yet he does not always clearly assign generative function to different forms of culture, visual or otherwise. Berger argues that art could shape as well as reflect culture, but his analysis of Eakins's paintings seems so finely attuned to subtle detail and esoteric knowledge that it is difficult to appreciate what cultural work the paintings might have done for nineteenth-century viewers rather less sophisticated than Berger himself.

Across the Great Divide focuses on the United States west of the Mississippi River, and contains essays spanning eighteenth-century colonial New Mexico to North American-set films of the early 1990s. The bulk of the essays, it should be noted, revolve around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a whole, the collection shares the blessings and curses typical of essay collections; what it loses in coherence of argument, it gains in a compensating richness of social diversity – a diversity beyond the scope of either Johansen's or Berger's monographs.

The collection's editors believe that scholars have too long mythologised an 'imagined West' (p. 5) within a master narrative of national progress enacted by heroic white men. Women's historians have destabilised this rosy narrative by inserting women into the equation, and they have also introduced broader social diversity in accounting for differences of race, ethnicity, and class among women. It is such social diversity that the editors of *Across the Great Divide* apply back to questions of masculinity, overtly aiming to destabilise further the old master narrative. The collection consequently features dialectics along two axes: one between mythologies and realities of the American West, and another between hegemonic and subaltern masculinities.

In fact, most of the essays presume hegemonic masculinity, and instead foreground subaltern masculinities. There are essays which cover Spanish colonials (by Ramon Gutierrez), Chinese immigrants (by Karen Leong and Steven Lee), nomadic cowboys (by Dee Garceau), copper workers (by Matthew Basso), Native American films (by Brian Klopoteck), and Mexican immigrants (by Jose Limon). Even men who subscribed to hegemonic versions of masculinity often faltered in striving to reproduce them in the frontier West, as in the case of the Gold Rush analysed with particular grace by Susan Lee Johnson and Gunther Peck. *Across the Great Divide* reflects the merit of collective enterprise in

historical scholarship since it manages to encompass a heterogeneous and dynamic part of the world from numerous perspectives. In the hands of a lone historian, the faddish mode has been to focus on hybridity as a way of approximating such heterogeneity, but the figure of the hybrid often begs more questions than it can answer. If there is at least one perspective not adequately included in *Across the Great Divide*, it is more concerted attention to the representation of men by women. Women's presence is acknowledged in many of the essays, but women's voices are relatively rare. Indeed, such an obsessive focus on self-representation by men has been a myopia skewing much of men's history as well as men's studies more generally.

As exemplary as *Across the Great Divide* is in its social diversity, it shares a conceptual blinder with Johansen's and Berger's monographs. All three books adhere to what can be called an 'internalist' view of masculinity in that their analysis starts and stops with how codes of masculinity were changed over time. New codes of masculinity are conceptualised purely as reactive to social and cultural change, yet do not seem to have any reciprocal impact upon society or culture. While culture surely affects gender, how does gender affect culture in turn? What do codes of masculinity beget, beyond new codes of masculinity?

Altogether, each of these three books contributes its portion to the rapidly expanding field of men's history. The field has undeniably grown dynamically in the last few years, yet it is at the same time converging with women's history as both fields are perhaps being subsumed under the broader category of 'gender history'. There is, for instance, a burgeoning literature on sexuality hinging fundamentally upon joint analysis of women and men.⁷ At what point will men's history, narrowly conceived, begin to yield diminishing returns and repetitive detail? Bryce Traister insists that 'heteromascularity studies' has already devolved into an ahistorical narrative of perpetual contingency if not crisis in the lives of all men, flattening any difference between men with power and men without it.⁸

One way out of this dilemma is to broaden the historical question by placing the study of masculinity in service of the study of nationalism (or imperialism), as has recently been done so ably by Dana Nelson.⁹ Recasting the analytical framework to consider the impact of gender upon culture, and not simply the impact of culture upon gender, remains a critical avenue of historical research, as well as pedagogy. Adding codes of masculinity as a new component of history has certainly been a fruitful first step, but the old master narrative still awaits more direct reconstitution.

Notes

1. Bruce Dorsey, 'History of Manhood in America, 1750–1920', *Radical History Review*, 64 (1996), pp. 19–30.
2. Some pioneering monographs with respect to the United States were: Mark Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (Yale University Press, 1989); Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865–1920* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Present Era* (Basic Books, 1993); George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (Basic Books, 1994); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).
3. On late antiquity, see the monographs: Virginia Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford University Press, 2000); Matthew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology*

- in *Late Antiquity* (University of Chicago Press, 2001). On the medieval period, see the essay collections: Clare A. Lees (ed.), *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (eds), *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (Garland Publishing, 1997); D. M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (Longman, 1999); Jacqueline Murray (ed.), *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (Garland Publishing, 1999).
4. On homosexuality and homosexual practices, see: Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870–1930* (University of Chicago Press, 1997); Netta Murray Goldsmith, *The Worst of Crimes: Homosexuality and the Law in Eighteenth-Century London* (Ashgate, 1998); Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution*, vol. 1, *Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (University of Chicago Press, 1998); George E. Haggerty, *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (Columbia University Press, 1999); Hans Turley, *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash: Piracy, Sexuality, and Masculine Identity* (New York University Press, 1999). On black masculinity in the Atlantic World, see: W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Harvard University Press, 1997); Maggie Montesinos Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1997).
 5. For early America, see: Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730–1840* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Mark E. Kann, *A Republic of Men: The American Founders, Gendered Language, and Patriarchal Politics* (New York University Press, 1998); Michael J. Rozbicki, *The Complete Colonial Gentleman: Cultural Legitimacy in Plantation America* (University Press of Virginia, 1998); Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (Yale University Press, 1999). For nineteenth-century America, see Judy Hilkey, *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Duke University Press, 1998). For early modern England, see Elizabeth A. Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (Longman, 1999); Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain 1660–1800* (Pearson Education, 2001). For nineteenth-century England, see John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (Yale University Press, 1999).
 6. For review essays marking the obsolescence of the 'separate spheres' paradigm, see Elizabeth Foyster, 'Recovering Lives from Behind the Gloss of Ideology: Recent Histories of Elite and Middle-Class Women in England and America', *Gender & History*, 12 (2000), pp. 237–41; Toby L. Ditz, 'What's Love Got to Do With It? The History of Men, The History of Gender in the 1990s', *Reviews in American History*, 28 (2000), pp. 167–80.
 7. See Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (eds), *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Merril D. Smith (ed.), *Sex and Sexuality in Early America* (New York University Press, 1998); Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy (eds), *Over the Threshold: Intimate Violence in Early America* (Routledge, 1999); Martha Hodes (ed.), *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York University Press, 1999); Janet Moore Lindman and Michele Lise Tarter (eds), *A Center of Wonders: The Body in Early America* (Cornell University Press, 2001); Merril D. Smith (ed.), *Sex Without Consent: Rape and Sexual Coercion in America* (New York University Press, 2001).
 8. See Bryce Traister, 'Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies', *American Quarterly*, 52 (2000), pp. 274–304.
 9. See Nelson, *National Manhood*.