

THEMATIC REVIEW

American Men's History and the Big Picture

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Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. xi + 328. ISBN 0-226-03219-1 (hb); 0 226 03220 5 (pb).

Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Manhood Lost: Fallen Drunkards and Redeeming Women in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. xi + 241. ISBN 0 8018 7166 2 (pb).

Martin Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. xii + 380. ISBN 0 8078 2851 3 (hb); 0 8078 55197 (pb).

Mark Tebeau, *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800–1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 440. ISBN 0 8018 6791 6 (hb).

In 2005, Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard reflected upon the place and progress of men's history within five centuries of British history, from the sixteenth through to the early twentieth centuries.¹ Harvey and Shepard challenged scholars to grapple more directly with the relationship between narratives of change within the field of men's history and the standard periodisation of British history cast more broadly. These four new monographs on American men's history cover a shorter time span and thus invite a slightly different question. How did American men's history through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries square not with periodisation, but with the metanarratives scholars habitually use to frame their particular topics? Is men's history attaining sufficient maturity as a field of research that it can begin to revise not only our periodisation but also our broader narratives of history? This amounts to something of an existential question, of course, about how historical narratives are constructed for research and pedagogy, and about how they influence, and might be influenced by, subfields of scholarship such as men's history.

Each of these four monographs proceeds in reference to its own metanarrative. In Tebeau's history of firefighting, the metanarrative concerns the transformation of a rural society into an urban one. In Summers's history of the black middle class, it concerns a transformation from a producer- to a consumer-oriented society. In Parsons's history

of temperance reform, the metanarrative traces a growing role of women in public life, culminating in women's suffrage. In Augst's history of business clerks, it involves the rise of liberal individualism, democracy and capitalism. In each case, men's history fits into a historical phenomenon of great significance, one taking place over many decades and affecting, in some way, everyone in American society. These phenomena are so significant, in fact, that they can be reduced to an instantly recognisable word or phrase: urbanisation, consumerism, women's suffrage, liberal individualism. These four monographs situate men's history within these metanarratives, but do they contribute anything of significance to those metanarratives? This is a higher standard beyond the mere relevance of men's history, and beyond the aim of adding detail and texture to the trajectory of men's history itself.

Mark Tebeau describes the history of firefighting in urban America through the nineteenth and into the early-twentieth century. His is a story of necessity and triumph, as urbanisation required fire protection, and firefighting improvements facilitated urbanisation. In a roundabout way, Tebeau testifies to the growing force of men's history because he acknowledges that other scholars (principally Amy Greenberg in her superb 1998 monograph)² have ably investigated the 'ethnic, class, and gender dimensions' of firefighting (p. 6), leaving him to focus instead on firefighting work and organisation. Tebeau's book is nevertheless suffused with analysis of masculinity. In other words, gender analysis appears throughout a book not explicitly about gender history, which may be a positive sign that gender is indeed becoming part of the standard analytical apparatus of any monograph. In paired chapters, Tebeau juxtaposes two sets of men – firefighters and insurance underwriters – in two cities, Philadelphia and St Louis. He is rather more attentive to applying gender analysis to firefighters than to insurance underwriters, perhaps since firefighters underwent more apparent collective change over time. Firefighters shifted their allegiance from the local community to the firefighting profession itself, and in the process updated their ideals of manhood away from republican service and toward professional and technological expertise. The outcome of the cultural work of both firefighters and insurance underwriters was to revise definitions of risk and safety, enabling urbanisation to transform the American landscape, so that city dwellers would come to outnumber country dwellers in the USA. However, it is difficult to gauge the actual role of firefighters and underwriters in this transformation because Tebeau concentrates on them to the exclusion of how their ideologies or organisational efforts were received or buffeted by the general public, by real estate developers, or by governments. Tebeau's account is replete with telling contrasts and parallels between firefighters and insurance underwriters, but the metanarrative of urbanisation looms outside and above the analysis. This serves the programme of men's history very admirably, adding new detail, but it deploys the historical metanarrative without ever engaging it.

Martin Summers has found a glaring omission in the scholarship on masculinity in the early twentieth century. At its worst, that scholarship is preoccupied with white men; at its best, it addresses white representations of black men; in both cases, the obvious omission is black male subjectivity. If Tebeau is notable for doing gender analysis in a book not about gender history, Summers is notable for linking gender analysis to the identity categories of race and class. Indeed, Summers's introduction is a perfect teaching device for graduate students in how deftly it lays out the historical problem, the historiographical context and conceptual carefulness. Summers seeks,

above all, to avoid reducing black male subjectivity to resistance to white hegemony, since such an approach leads scholars to ignore relationships and conflicts within subordinated groups. Summers presents four case studies: Prince Hall Freemasons, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the Harlem Renaissance, and Fisk and Howard Universities. Actually, these four case studies divide into two sets, since Summers finds that the Prince Hall Freemason and UNIA, for all their apparent differences, both hinged their ideals of manhood upon commercial capitalism, producer republicanism and moral respectability. Although both were invested in black racial pride, their ideals of manhood nevertheless resembled white ideals of manhood. Middle-class similarity trumped racial difference, in other words. A similar pattern would be true even of the backlash against bourgeois respectability reflected in the literary milieu of the Harlem Renaissance and student protests at Fisk and Howard. This backlash among blacks resembled the same phenomenon among white writers and students in the 1920s, and the outcome was a broad cultural shift from a producer- to a consumer-oriented society for both black and white middle-class men. Summers's account is richly multidimensional rather than fruitlessly dichotomous, and manages to be so without wiping away the importance or intensity of race as a factor. But it remains unclear how a common middle-class sensibility seeped into both black and white constituencies, since Summers does not interrogate either 'white culture' or black influence upon white culture. In the end, as in Tebeau's monograph, the metanarrative (this time of consumerism) looms somewhere outside and above the analysis.

Summers filled a lacuna in the historiography; Elaine Frantz Parsons enters a crowded field of scholarship on alcohol consumption and temperance reform. Her particular angle is a fresh one, which is to investigate drunkard narratives for their representation of the influence of the environment upon the individual, and the role of women in the public sphere. Parsons quickly establishes the ubiquity of drunkard narratives in American print culture, and examines the paradoxical representation of male volition in these narratives. Because one can readily imagine that free will was considered a crucial masculine trait in the nineteenth century, the strained textual gymnastics concerning the volition of male drunkards is that much more compelling a topic for analysis. Lost volition, given over to drink, was equated with lost manhood. Temperance reformers tended to blame not drunkards but purveyors of alcohol, yet this characterisation was premised on a prior denial of volition to the men who drank, undermining the prevailing presumption of masculine agency. The cultural dissonance was worse, in fact, because temperance reformers assigned themselves – and the women among them – the task of influencing drunkards to return to the straight and narrow. If it wasn't the purveyors of alcohol luring men with homosocial fun, then it was temperance reformers telling men to have their fun at home instead. Either way, men, supposedly the repository of volition and agency in American culture, seemed to have neither. The literary tropes to encapsulate these processes in the drunkard narratives were seduction and invasion, tropes usually reserved for women and non-whites, not white men. The unintended consequence of female temperance reformers seeking to restore the integrity of the patriarchal household was to turn their growing social activism into the right to vote in 1920. Precisely how this outcome came about cannot be understood from the evidence of drunkard narratives, of course. The strength of Parsons's account is its plying at the contradiction between men's presumed agency and presumed

lack of agency, but here once again the metanarrative stands outside and above the analysis.

A literary scholar, Thomas Augst deploys unpublished diaries by twenty business clerks from the nineteenth century to extraordinary effect. His prose may sometimes suffer from repetition in his pet terminology, but his monograph is densely packed, analytically rich and admirably ambitious. Augst may lack the succinctness of Summers, but his own introduction compensates with a virtuoso conceptual precision – another superb model for graduate students. Augst situates young male business clerks in specific social spaces (diary, lecture hall, library, office) where they deployed literacy with an eye on the business world. Literacy was neither merely a technical skill bestowing credentials on young men for business, nor merely an ornament displaying aesthetic refinement. Rather, in the right hands it fostered an outlook of rational mastery and moral superiority equipping young men to navigate a society and economy characterised by increasing mobility and the threat of failure. Certain kinds of literacy practices and institutions – self-conscious writing in a diary, attending public lectures, patronising libraries – enabled young men to construct and sustain habits of character that conjured the sheer determination and power needed to control their own fate amid the harshness of a capitalist society. This determination and power entailed masculinity, of course, and Augst stresses throughout that the crucial moral thrust behind this mode of masculinity was acquired through new practices and institutions of literacy. Whereas such a high level of literacy was traditionally more exclusive to the elite, in the nineteenth century it would be democratised enough (but not too much) to serve middle-class young men in their social ambitions. Moreover, middle-class young men would encounter literacy practices throughout their life cycle and across multiple contexts of work and leisure. Literacy – and the moral intensity it promised and delivered – was everywhere in their lives. The rise of capitalism, however, was something much larger than the (partial) democratising of literacy, or the exuding of a sense of moral entitlement. For all of Augst's conceptual sophistication, it is surprising that he tends to conflate capitalism, democracy and individualism, without ever considering, say, either the raw violence of capitalism or the community fetish typically intertwined with the ideology of individualism.

With a source base centred on twenty unpublished diaries, Augst simply cannot reach the full scope of his ambitions. He duly invokes an overarching metanarrative, and situates masculinity within it, and presents in my view the most impressive analysis of these four monographs. But the metanarratives remain formidable in their determining grip upon men's history. In a recent monograph, Anne Lombard pursued a helpfully different approach to both metanarrative and periodisation.³ Lombard argued for the enduring force of continuity when it came to ideologies of masculinity in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England, but she made a clever analytical move in juxtaposing this continuity against trends of change elsewhere in society. Masculinity thus became an instrument of cultural conservatism in her account, rather than merely a manifestation of metanarrative. Tebeau, Summers, Parsons and Augst all wisely treat masculinity and other identity categories as culturally active, as creating something new – yet always as reinforcing the metanarrative. While this neat correlation to metanarrative certainly makes men's history conducive to undergraduate teaching from survey to seminar, men's history has still not yet answered the scholarly challenge of critically engaging the 'big picture'.

Notes

1. Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard, 'What Have Historians Done with Masculinity? Reflections on Five Centuries of British History, circa 1500-1950', *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005), pp. 274-80.
2. Amy S. Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
3. Anne S. Lombard, *Making Manhood: Growing Up Male in Colonial New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).