THE DOMESTICATION OF THE MALE?
RECENT RESEARCH ON NINETEENTH-
AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH
MASCULINITY*

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ABSTRACT. This review will survey some of the most important historical studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century British masculinity which have appeared in the last decade. It endorses John Tosh’s insistence that it is necessary to move beyond the homosocial environments and explicit ideologies of ‘manliness’ studied by those historians who, in the 1970s, first sought a gendered history of men in modern Britain. However, it also warns that a commendable desire to ensure that men’s identities are located in relationship to women, children, and the home must be accompanied by a degree of scepticism towards unproblematic narratives of male domestication. Men constantly travelled back and forth across the frontier of domesticity, if only in the realm of imagination, attracted by the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood, but also enchanted by various escapist fantasies (especially the adventure story or war film) which celebrated militaristic hypermasculinity and male bonding. This commentary also insists that, in order to enrich our understanding of male domesticity, existing studies of middle-class men will have to be supplemented by further research on aristocratic and working-class masculinities, and that national, ethnic, and racial differences also need to be more fully registered.

I

While, as feminists have rightly asserted, there is no shortage of histories of men (and of the public spheres of war, diplomacy, and statecraft in which they have been traditionally predominant), the history of masculinity – the study of men as gendered beings – has been a relatively recent historiographical departure. However in the last decade, historical interest in masculinity has dramatically increased. This development is partially explained by cultural trends outside the academy, in particular a debate – which can be mapped on sites as diverse as the novels of Nick Hornby, the autobiographical reflections of Tony Parsons, the mythopoetic ‘men’s movement’ of Robert Bly, and soccer star David Beckham’s response to both fashion and fatherhood – about whether the close of the twentieth century ushered in a ‘crisis in masculinity’, as men in the western world were obliged to come to terms with second wave feminism and the erosion of patriarchy. However, while this ongoing media debate has rendered the history of masculinity highly topical, it has been bolstered by

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a shift in scholarly paradigms, in particular the emergence, within the field of women’s history, of ‘gender history’, which insists that femininity has always been defined relative to masculinity (and indeed vice versa). Historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have recently highlighted the inadequacies of the ‘separate spheres’ model of gender roles, revealing that the boundary between the female/private and male/public realms was unstable and regularly transgressed. Such research has not merely allowed the public lives of women to be recovered and fully registered, but conversely has suggested that the histories of the domestic environment or of the family might need to pay more attention than hitherto to the male presence. From a very different direction, the expansion of queer history has reminded historians that normative masculinity not merely seeks to make distinctions between men and women (and between men and children), but also between different categories of men. Historians have also been able to appropriate the growing sophistication of theoretical approaches to masculinity, drawn from the fields of genetics, anthropology, psychology, and linguistics. Of particular value have been the writings of R. W. Connell, who has promoted a number of useful categories, including ‘hegemonic’ and ‘subordinate’ masculinity, and ‘complicity’ (the process by which men who do not fully match the tropes of hegemonic masculinity nevertheless collude with it in order to receive the dividend accorded to men by patriarchal systems of authority). How far has this flourishing new field of historical inquiry impacted on the historiography of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain? It seems particularly pertinent to review this issue now, a decade after the publication of the collection Manful assertions, edited by Michael Roper and John Tosh, and widely accepted as a landmark in the study of masculinity in modern Britain. This review will survey some of the most important studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century masculinity which have appeared since 1991, and isolate the strengths and weaknesses of that literature. It is not intended as a comprehensive catalogue, but rather is a commentary which sequesters a select number of texts in order to consider the extent, and chronology, of ‘male domestication’ in Britain in the last 200 years. It acknowledges the considerable achievements of a sub-discipline which is less than two decades old, but also passes a critical eye over the surprising lacunae which still remain in the literature.

Those who first sought a gendered history of men in modern Britain clustered their research around nineteenth-century debates over ‘manliness’, most notably those associated with muscular Christianity and the creation and consolidation of the elite public schools. This concentration was not surprising, given that the writings of Charles Kingsley or Dr Arnold appeared to represent the promotion of an explicit ideology of masculinity, and that these codes of honour and chivalry had considerable purchase among the cultural, social, and imperial elites of Victorian Britain. It also

4 It should be noted that there has also been considerable interest in recent years in eighteenth-century masculinity. See, for example, the contributions to Tim Hitchcock and Michele Cohen, eds., *English masculinities, 1660–1800* (London, 1999).
offered a useful parallel to the equally self-conscious and legible codes of ‘manhood’
(promoted by figures such as William James or Theodore Roosevelt) which American
historians were discovering to be a central motif of public discourses in the Gilded Age
United States. However, many historians were concerned that studies of ‘manliness’
inevitably privileged elite over popular conceptions of masculinity, concerned as they
were with the conduct of Rugby schoolboys, Oxford undergraduates, clerics, members
of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood or the Aesthetic Movement, and aristocratic big
game hunters. Moreover, for John Tosh, not merely were these studies socially
exclusive, but they were largely concerned with homosocial environments – especially
the boys’ private school – from which women were excluded. Throughout the 1990s
Tosh set out to recover the other side of Victorian masculinity, in a series of articles on
middle-class men and domesticity, all of which were reshaped into his authoritative and
convincing monograph, A man’s place, published in 1999. Drawing on etiquette
manuals, divorce case records, private diaries, and letters, Tosh mapped the domestic
responsibilities of nineteenth-century middle-class men, as husbands, fathers, and heads
of household. While domestic advice literature on childcare and the management of
domestic servants was exclusively addressed to women, Tosh insists that men were both
present and significant in the home. Despite the radically divergent daily experiences of
husbands and wives, which raised the possibility of a fatal polarization between
breadwinner and home maker, companionship was widely stipulated to be central
to bourgeois marriage. The legacies of both Evangelicism and Romanticism encouraged
men to display affection to wives and children in the home, and domesticity for
men was not just a pattern of residence or a web of obligations, but a state of mind,
what Tosh labels a ‘profound attachment’. However, Tosh’s central thesis does not
blind him to the limitations to, and contradictions within, middle-class male
domesticity. For example, while Victorian fathers were often present at the birth of their
children, this was to underline the authority of the paterfamilias, the bearer of the family
name, rather than to satisfy the prescriptions of a companionate marriage. While it was
acceptable for fathers to take time to play with older children, babies remained secluded
in the nursery, and men took little interest in the rearing of infants. Men were nominally
in overall control of the household, but they were not expected to involve themselves in
the details of domestic management. Indeed divorce cases and advice literature both
condemned the unnecessarily intrusive husband. Another potential source of friction in
the Victorian home lay in the fact that, while the father was the ultimate source of
discipline, the nineteenth-century cult of motherhood invested moral authority in the
domestic female, untainted as she was by sexual desire and the beastliness of public life. Men were
obliged to negotiate this new moral landscape, in which family prayers, led by the father
at the dinner table, were replaced by more intimate bedside prayers, conducted by the
mother. As women usurped the moral and religious instruction of children, men now
foregrounded practical education, sharing with (especially male) children their
thoughts on business or politics. In a significant linguistic displacement, fathers’

7 John Tosh, ‘Domesticity and manliness in the Victorian middle class: the family of Edward
White Benson’, in Roper and Tosh, eds., Manful assertions; John Tosh, ‘Authority and nurture in
middle-class fatherhood: the case of early and mid Victorian England’, Gender and History, 8 (1996),
pp. 48–64; John Tosh, ‘From Keighley to St Denis: separation and intimacy in Victorian
responsibility for their children was recoded as ‘influence’ instead of ‘authority’. However, despite these apparent ambiguities, fathers often achieved considerable levels of intimacy with their children, not just in the annual role of ‘Father Christmas’ (which became increasingly common by the 1860s) but also in more daily domestic rituals. The journalist J. R. Seeley laughed and romped with his children, and delighted in their desire to call him ‘Daddy’.

Tosh’s nuanced analysis is therefore a reminder that not all Victorian fathers were as coldly tyrannical as Samuel Butler’s Mr Pontifex. Nor, judging from the startlingly candid correspondence between Isaac Holden and Sarah Sugden retrieved by Tosh, were all Victorian marriages as emotionally stunted as those of John Ruskin or Charles Dickens. Tosh’s achievement is to ensure that, in future, the history of modern British masculinity will not be pursued merely in the context of public life, but also in the environment of home and family. In so doing, he has provided an effective retort to the legitimate concerns of some feminists that increased interest in masculinity among historians might serve as a Trojan horse, ultimately leading to the restoration of the supremacy of male-dominated historical paradigms, for example, the histories of politics, warfare, and diplomacy. This is not to say that Tosh’s work is entirely unproblematic. Readers familiar with contemporary studies of housework will be aware that increased time spent by men in the domestic sphere has not always led to a proportionate increase in their participation in household management or childcare. Presence does not automatically imply involvement or engagement. Moreover, to borrow Tosh’s own terminology, ‘absent fathers’ – those like Daniel Meinetzhagen who led an almost bachelor-like life, out hunting with male cronies – were comparatively rare, but ‘distant fathers’ – those like cleric Edward Benson, who were not physically missing, but still publicly withheld intimacy from their children – were possibly less uncommon than Tosh’s overall assessment would suggest. A more detailed consideration of the issue of domestic violence might also have introduced an element of qualification into Tosh’s sanguine assessment of male attitudes to domestic responsibility.* Tosh himself concedes the potential fragility of male domesticity in the final section of his book. Here he argues that the positive valuation given to marriage, home, and children peaked in the mid-Victorian years, and was immediately followed by a ‘flight from domesticity’. From the 1870s, middle-class men married later or chose not to marry at all, and the great imperial expansion of the closing decades of the nineteenth century was fed in part by a generation of permanent bachelors – men such as Rhodes, Kitchener, or Gordon – who eschewed family life in favour of the attractions of overseas adventure. Tosh here endorses the opening phases of a chronology of British masculinity which, while rarely explicitly enunciated, is deeply inscribed in the assumptions of many cultural historians, and which can be summarized as follows.

Between 1870 and 1914 the imperatives of empire celebrated a militaristic and robust hypermasculinity, which found its apotheosis in the homosocial world of the boy’s adventure story. As Allan Quartermain, hero of Rider Haggard’s King Solomon’s mines (1885), infamously boasted of the narrative of manly courage he was about to relate, ‘there is not a petticoat in the whole history’. However, in the aftermath of the mechanized slaughter of the 1914–18 war, the romantic language of heroic masculinity suffered a fatal blow, and there was a reaction, a reassertion of the domesticated and


** H. Rider Haggard, King Solomon’s mines (Harmondsworth, 1958 edn), p. 12.
private categories of masculinity. Indeed, according to Alison Light, this newly
domesticated male, who preferred dominoes and home improvement to outwitting
rebellious tribesmen on the North-West Frontier, became a paradigm, not merely of
normative masculinity, but of interwar national identity.10 The late Victorian ‘flight
from domesticity’ had become impaled on the barbed wire of the Somme, and even
another call to arms – in 1939 – could not restore the ‘high homosociability’ of an
earlier, undomesticated, and more elemental age.

Such a narrative of domestication, reaction and ultimate re-domestication, is not
without merit. There is substantial evidence from a variety of media that, faced with the
challenge of a rising women’s movement and the need to maintain national virility in
the face of increased economic and military competition from overseas, the domesticated
male of the years between 1870 and 1914 was accorded much less respect than his
father’s generation had received. Graham Dawson has illustrated this trend through
relating how the life story of Sir Henry Havelock, imperial hero of the Indian Mutiny,
was reconfigured in the years after his death in 1858.11 John Clark Marshman’s Memoirs
of Major-General Sir Henry Havelock, KCB (1860) deploys two interlinked narratives: that
of Havelock as heroic soldier, but also that of Havelock as a family man, with deep
emotional investments in his wife and eight children. The bitterness and strain
Havelock endured after his decision to leave his family behind in England and return
to his military career in India in 1847 is fully registered in Marshman’s narrative, as is
his distress during his wife’s illness and his grief after the deaths of two of his children.

By contrast in commemorations of Havelock’s life after the 1880s, the general’s domestic
life virtually disappears from the narrative. In Taylor’s The story of Sir Henry Havelock
(1894), Havelock’s marriage only merits a single sentence, and there is no reference
at all to the anxieties and separations it entailed. Dawson concludes that, from
these rewritings of the Havelock story, ‘we can trace the splitting-off from exemplary
life adventure of domestic concerns … and the emergence of a conception of “moral
manhood” oriented exclusively towards the public world of action and combat’.

In A. James Hammerton’s exploration of attitudes towards suburban lower-middle-
class men between 1870 and the First World War, male domesticity is not
expunged, as it was from the Havelock narratives. Rather, it was exposed to relentless
lampooning. Lower-middle-class husbands were presented in the savage parodies of
journalist Thomas Crosland as effeminate weaklings who had surrendered their
mastery to women and their moral manliness to the pursuit of trivial and tawdry
consumer goods. Suburbanization had promoted both physical degeneration and
sexual emasculation, a combined threat to national potency which could only be
redeemed by the strenuous masculinity of the imperial frontier, either literally, or
transferred back to the metropolis by means of Baden-Powell’s Scouting movement.12

Dawson’s and Hammerton’s studies of two very different types of source material both
seem to bear out Tosh’s notion of a late-nineteenth-century retreat from domesticity.

However, in the writings of political historians working on the nineteenth century a

10 Alison Light, Forever England: femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars (London,
1991), pp. 6–11.
11 Graham Dawson, Soldier heroes: British adventure, empire and the imagining of masculinities
12 A. James Hammerton, ‘The English weakness?: gender, satire and “moral manliness” in the
lower middle class, 1870–1920’, in Alan Kidd and David Nicholls, eds., Gender, civic culture and
consumerism: middle-class identity in Britain, 1860–1940 (Manchester, 1999).
very different chronology appears to have emerged. Anna Clark’s account of the
gendering of political identities among working-class radicals reveals that by the 1840s
the Chartists had come to place a positive valuation on domesticity, believing it to be
the key to replacing the indiscipline and sexual antagonism of plebeian life with the
discipline of a united working-class community. Such sentiments did not go uncontested. While ‘moral force’ Chartists lionized domesticity, ‘physical force’
Chartists suggested that the role of the plebeian activist was not to instruct his family at
home, but to defend their interests, with his fists, on the street. The attempt to ape
middle-class conceptions of domesticity was inevitably compromised by the fact that
male wages alone were insufficient to support families, and so working-class women still
had to undertake paid work outside the home. However, by the time Chartism evolved
into late nineteenth-century Radicalism, artisan activists were presenting their claims to
suffrage and citizenship in terms of their responsibilities as respectable husbands,
fathers, and heads of households. While the ‘independent’ artisan enfranchised in
1867 might still be more inclined to spend his non-working hours with his workmates in
the pub than with his wife in the home, excessive drinking and abdication of domestic
responsibilities were less likely to be tolerated than they had been earlier in the century.
Jon Lawrence’s research suggests that this trajectory of domestication was also present
in popular Conservatism. In the Disraeli era, the Tories had sought to appeal to urban
voters by defending traditional working-class masculine pleasures such as gambling and
drinking from the interference of a Liberal state, which they claimed had been hijacked
by intolerant Nonconformists and moral reformers. However, from the 1880s the
Conservative party, influenced by the female activists of the Primrose League, began to
recast itself as the defender of family values. In this new climate, the home, rather than
the pub, became central to the mission of popular Conservatism, a development which
was obviously enhanced by the arrival of a national female electorate in 1918. Not that
this shift was unequivocally welcomed by all Tory activists. David Jarvis has revealed
that in the 1920s some Conservative organizers were anxious that their attempt to
appeal to women and domesticated men was denuding the party of its traditions of
masculine robustness. In particular, it was feared that young men might be lured away
by the more virile (not to say pugilistic) culture of fascist politics. However, the changing nature of political activity (in particular the eclipse of the rowdy world of the
hustings by the more sedate media of the radio) meant there was increasingly less space
for the exercise of unrestrained and visceral masculinity in public life. How should we
read these shifts away from a more elemental and robust brand of masculine politics?
Is it possible that the ‘domestication’ of working-class men was being promoted at the
very moment that middle-class men were starting to feel constrained by the world of
home and family? Or were conceptions of masculinity in the political realm developing
autonomously from those current in the social and cultural spheres?

II

What might help resolve this paradox is a fuller appreciation of how male responses to domesticity remained complex and ambivalent throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that it was possible simultaneously to both embrace and reject the attributes of domestic manliness. Men constantly travelled back and forward across the frontier of domesticity, if only in the realm of imagination, attracted by the responsibilities of marriage or fatherhood, but also enchanted by fantasies of the energetic life and homosocial camaraderie of the adventure hero. If there was a ‘flight from domesticity’ in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, it was unable to claim a monopoly over the masculine imagination, which was characterized by contradictory patterns of desire and self-identification. While the authors of male adventure stories appeared to find it necessary to denude their narratives of any domestic material, this did not preclude their books being read by suburban fathers who would, only an hour or so previously, have been found tending their gardens or reading bedtime stories to their daughters. Conversely, imperial adventurers and soldiers could still fill the pages of their letters and journals with longings for the scent of roses trailed around their cottage door or the laughter of their children. The complexity of Edwardian masculine sensibilities is also evident in a fascinating collection of essays on male support for the campaign for women’s suffrage. Pro-suffrage men often combined a commitment to sexual co-operation and the sharing of domestic responsibilities with an eagerness to assert their manliness through varieties of direct action (for example, Hugh Franklin’s assault on Winston Churchill with a dog whip) which some female militants felt were unnecessarily violent. It might be better therefore to replace the simplistic narrative of a ‘flight from domesticity’ between 1870 and 1914, followed by a ‘re-domestication’ of the male in the interwar years, by an awareness that men were continually seeking to reconcile and integrate the contradictory impulses of domestic responsibility and escapism, both of which could, at various times, find sanction in the polyphonic voices of popular culture or politics. Such a reconceptualization not merely casts doubt on Tosh’s late nineteenth-century ‘flight from domesticity’, but also calls into question the remainder of this established chronology of British masculinity. For it suggests that there were definite limits to the ‘domestication’ of the male in the aftermath of the Great War. In fact there already exists a growing scepticism among cultural historians over whether heroic masculinity perished in the fields of Flanders. The ironic anti-heroism of writers such as Robert Graves should not be allowed to obscure the continued celebration of traditional adventure culture in the popular fiction of John Buchan or the imperial epic films of Alexander Korda. As John MacKenzie has demonstrated, 1930s British films were often straightforward adaptations of pre-1914 ‘heroic lives’ narratives. Nor were intellectuals immune from these instincts. In the 1930s the ‘Auden generation’ extolled rugged, elemental heroes, especially aviators and mountaineers, envied the primitive physicality of the proletarian worker, and scorned the comforts of suburban domesticity in favour of the violent adventures of the Spanish Civil War.

This is not to say that there was not a change in mood between pre-1914 and post-

17 Angela V. John and Claire Eustance, eds., The men’s share?: masculinities, male support and women’s suffrage in Britain, 1890–1920 (London, 1997).
1918 imaginings of masculinity. Kelly Boyd has insisted that interwar boys’ fiction, in contrast to late Victorian adventures, tested the manly resolve of its heroes in the familiar surroundings of the school or playing field, not in the wilds of Africa. Moreover, they lacked the independence of action possessed by their late nineteenth-century equivalents, being obliged to defer to the authority of elders (usually parents or teachers) or the wider community. However, interwar boys’ literature was frequently more violent than its predecessors, with the hero using his physical strength, rather than his wits, to overcome his enemies. Adult literature reveals even more clearly the potential fragility of interwar domestication, and not just in the realm of male imaginings. Joseph McAleer’s survey of Mills and Boon titles in the 1920s and 1930s reveals that romantic popular fiction aimed at female readers preferred to place its romantic storylines in the context of everyday settings, such as the office or the tennis club, rather than against the exotic backcloth of distant lands. Moreover, the Mills and Boon ‘alpha male’ was presented as suitable material for the eventual outcome (which these formulaic novels inevitably delivered) of a companionate marriage, being more likely to be a provincial businessman than a foreign prince. However, the popular success among female readers of E. M. Hull’s romance The sheik (1918), with its brutal, non-reflective male hero, oriental setting, and absurdly melodramatic plot, might suggest that, at least in the realm of fantasy, the ascendancy of the domesticated man after the First World War was not altogether secure. As Graham Dawson has shown, similar ambiguities feature in the interwar cult of T. E. Lawrence. Lawrence could boast the military achievements and courage of the traditional imperial man of action, but his contemplative otherworldliness and adoption of Arab dress rendered him a transgressive figure, setting him apart from conventional military masculinity. In his autobiography, Seven pillars of wisdom, Lawrence deliberately undermines what could have been presented as a heroic narrative, by admitting his responsibility for the massacre of Turkish prisoners-of-war at Tafas, an act which placed him at odds with the conventions of the chivalric soldier hero. However, Lawrence’s apparent sensitivity, his almost ‘feminine’ streak, did not imply a reconciliation with the domestic realm. Seven pillars was a paean to the male bonding of the Bedouin warriors alongside whom Lawrence fought, and on his return to Britain, he hid himself away in an equally homosocial (if decidedly less exotic) world – that of the ground crew at an RAF base.

An awareness of this latent ambiguity in male responses to domesticity would also allow a more nuanced understanding of gender relations in the late 1940s and 1950s, a period regularly presented as the apex of domesticity in modern Britain. The consolidation of family life after the disruption of wartime was one of the dominant motifs of social reconstruction in the years immediately after 1945. Social and cultural authorities sought to make marriage and the home more attractive to both women and men through the promotion of the ‘companionate marriage’, in which teamwork and partnership were to replace unquestioned patriarchal authority as the basis of domestic life. Returning servicemen were expected to put the excitement and brutalization of military life behind them, and to take up the sober responsibilities of the male breadwinner, patient father, and considerate husband. While recent studies

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have revealed that the cult of domesticity did not preclude women from exploring aspects of their identity which were not exclusively yoked to housework or motherhood, most accounts of this period have presented the post-war male as relatively one-dimensional and the redomestication of men returning from war as unproblematic. The sociological studies of both middle-class and working-class communities by Willmott and Young or Ferdynand Zweig appeared to confirm that men had become more home-centred by the mid-1950s, and now felt pride, rather than embarrassment, when encountered on the streets pushing perambulators. Not that all men were happy to fulfil the role of the domesticated good provider. Lynne Segal has pointed that in mining communities, men were still unlikely to help out with housework, while the output of literary ‘angry young men’ such as Kingsley Amis or John Osborne revealed a misogynistic rebellion against both the domestic and the feminine. While Segal provides a necessary corrective to the cosy image of the 1950s domesticated male, she ultimately over-states her case, since both coalminers and alienated ‘angries’ were distinct minority groups in 1950s Britain. A more subtle reading of gender roles in this period is offered by Stephen Brooke, who suggests that the destabilising impact of an expanded female workforce and the separation of sexuality from fertility was as likely to be dramatized in the nostalgia for ‘authentic’ working-class family and community (in particular a sentimental – if potentially sexist – tribute to the ‘Mam’) which underpinned the writings of Richard Hoggart as it was to be found in the celebration of aggressive masculinity in the diatribes of Jimmy Porter.

Nevertheless, both Segal and Brooke imply that the reformed masculinity of the late 1940s and 1950s ‘family man’ was neither unconditional nor entirely secure, and the possibility of male restlessness in the immediate post-war years deserves fuller consideration. Marriage guidance manuals were candid about the problems created by men’s ambivalence about demobilization and their reluctance to give up the all-male comradeship of service life. Some former servicemen played an active role in veterans’ groups such as the British Legion, but for many others the attempt to reclaim the emotionally satisfying aspects of wartime male bonding was much more likely to take place at the level of fantasy, transposed into the cultural artifacts of popular cinema and literature. An imaginative male flight from domesticity may account for the proliferation of war films and books in this period, works such as Paul Brickhill’s The dam-busters, Eric Williams’s The wooden horse, and Pat Reid’s The Colditz story. Prisoner-of-war narratives in particular provided unapologetically homosocial fantasies, which allowed men to engage in elaborate rituals of play reminiscent of the school playground, but which also permitted deep attachments to, and concern for, male comrades. In the era in which the companionate marriage had supposedly come of age, it is therefore possible to discover popular cultural signifiers of a yearning for an alternative male-only

‘family’ located in a fantasized wartime narrative. It is a yearning which was largely unspoken, since most war films of this period vetoed verbal expressivity in favour of stiff-upper-lips and firm handshakes, even in the face of grief or failure. In her classic feminist polemic, *The hearts of men*, Barbara Ehrenreich argued that from the mid-1950s both the so-called ‘Playboy philosophy’ and the writings of the ‘beat generation’ suggested that many men in the United States were (at least at a psychological level) fleeing domestic responsibility in favour of a self-indulgent detachment from the claims of women and children. However, films such as *The cruel sea* or *Angels one–five* suggest that in 1950s Britain domesticity had to compete, not with the frivolous excitements of the Hugh Hefner-inspired bachelor pad or sports car which feature in Ehrenreich’s account of American men’s ‘flight from commitment’, but with alternative responsibilities and attachments – to the nation or to one’s comrades – which required self-discipline and stoicism. However, while there was little existentialist content in this particular fantasy of male heroism, in an era when the war years were still physically close (and national service was still in operation), the disruptive effect such imaginings might have had on domestic manliness, while they should not be overplayed, cannot be easily disregarded. A willingness to contest the notion that the twentieth century has witnessed an unambiguous and unproblematic domestication of male identities is therefore an important requirement for establishing a more nuanced history of modern British masculinity, as is a recognition that those identities are as likely to be imagined as they are to be socially constructed.

The intrusive impact of fantasies of military service on the attainment of domesticated masculinity make it all the more necessary to study the effect of total war on men’s lives in the twentieth century. Yet historians of masculinity have been surprisingly reluctant to write about the two world wars. Possibly essentialist arguments about men’s innate capacity for violence might appear to render discussion of male subjectivities during wartime superfluous, or men’s participation in fighting and killing may be embarrassing to those who seek to use the history of masculinity to recover the more sensitive and reflective dimensions to men’s lives. Or maybe younger male historians are inhibited by a guilt that they, unlike their fathers and grandfathers, have never had to fight in combat, and that it might be offensive to offer judgement on the attitudes of those who were actually present at Ypres or at Monte Cassino. The only serious exception to this story of neglect has been the writings of Joanna Bourke. Bourke’s *Dismembering the male* has been reviewed previously in this journal, and will not be discussed at length here. Her study of the impact of the First World War on the male body is full of highly suggestive arguments, particularly in relation to official and popular attitudes to disablement and malingering. Bourke’s conclusion is that the war created the possibility of greater male intimacy, but that, once the conflict ended, men eagerly returned to domesticity and male–female companionship.

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28 Martin Francis, ‘Heroism, domesticity and empire: Scott of the Antarctic (1948) and the “flight from commitment”’ (Paper given at the North American Conference on British Studies, Pasadena, California, October 2000).


30 This neglect contrasts with the interest in male subjectivities during the First World War among literary scholars, for example, Adrian Caesar, *Taking it like a man: suffering, sexuality and the war poets* (London, 1993).

compromised by differences of class or ethnicity, divisions between volunteers and conscripts, and by a desire not to develop familiarity with a comrade who might soon be killed in action. However, while Bourke’s argument is bolstered by an impressive array of diaries, letters, and unpublished memoirs composed by both officers and rank-and-file soldiers, some of these testimonies are unreliable, composed as they were long after the events they describe. Moreover, Bourke is too ready to discard examples of how wartime male bonding could be revived in peacetime, albeit in less explicit and more irregular forms, for example, Remembrance Day commemorations, or the nostalgia for the ‘front generation’ which fed the utopian visions of both interwar socialists such as R. H. Tawney and fascists such as Oswald Mosley. Officers’ concern and affection for the men under their command certainly had a post-war political legacy, in the Tory paternalism of Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, or the social conscience of Clement Attlee and Hugh Dalton. Military allusions and metaphors permeated civilian life in the 1920s and 1930s, even in the most unlikely places, for example the discourses of pacifists and former conscientious objectors.

True, Bourke’s insistence that the war did not create a fundamental rift between the worlds of fighting men and those of wives and mothers back home certainly seems more convincing than the numerous literary studies of the Great War poets, which emphasize male gender anxieties that were frequently disclosed in bitter denunciations of women and the feminine. The misogyny of Siegfried Sassoon ultimately said more about his own sexual neuroses than it did about attitudes of male combatants in general. However, in a conflict (unlike the Second World War) in which most women were not directly exposed to enemy action, there were inevitably potential tensions between the sexes. For example, Nicoletta Gullace has deployed the mythology of the ‘white feathers’ allegedly handed out by patriotic women to men who appeared to have shirked military service in 1914, to indicate how an act of female agency could expose the fragility of masculine conceptions of courage or shame.

The literature on war and masculinity in Britain during the Second World War is less substantial than that which exists on the 1914–18 conflict. However, a welcome intervention has recently come from Sonya Rose, who has contended that masculine heroism in 1939–45 deliberately rejected the heroic manliness of 1914, and instead emphasized the understated, self-deprecating, good-humoured courage of the ‘little man’. Rose’s sophisticated account reveals how the templates of national identity and masculinity were fused in wartime Britain, the emotional restraint and ‘common sense’ of the British male matching the temperate tropes of Britishness. Alison Light’s domestication of British national identity in the interwar years was consolidated, but was now registered in the masculine as well as the feminine realm of cultural production.

While Rose’s argument is broadly convincing, it seems necessary to acknowledge briefly contesting narratives which were also present during the Second World War. While


33 For example, Elaine Showalter, ‘Rivers and Sassoon: the inscription of male gender anxieties’, in Margaret Higonnet et al., eds., Behind the lines: gender and the two world wars (New Haven, 1987).


RAF Bomber Command embodied the new technocratic, meritocratic masculinity of the ‘People’s War’, by contrast the fighter pilots who were widely believed to have saved Britain from certain defeat in 1940 represented old-style, public school, visions of chivalric masculinity. Churchill’s monumental presence also suggested that aristocratic genres of masculinity were far from redundant. Rose’s study is largely concerned with men on the home front, and as yet there is no detailed study of masculinity among fighting men during the war. Outside the academy, the writings of Sebastian Faulks, the reprinting of Richard Hillary’s classic RAF quasi-autobiography, *The last enemy*, and the popularity of the cinematic epic *Saving Private Ryan* all reveal a renewed popular interest in the subjective and personal dimension to male combat experience during the Second World War, and it is to be hoped that historians will be more eager in future to explore this critical period for the mapping of the changing configurations of twentieth-century British masculinity.

In order to deepen our understanding of masculinities in the last two hundred years, it will be necessary to supplement the work of Tosh and Hammerton on the middle classes with studies of aristocratic and working-class genres of manly behaviour. The Victorian middle classes often contrasted their public masculine vigour and private domestic affectivity with what they claimed was aristocratic effeminacy and debauchery. Amanda Vickery has shown that eighteenth-century gentlemen like William Gossip of Top Arch celebrated domesticity, restraint, hard work, and conjugality, and that the unrestrained patrician excesses of the Regency existed more in the imagination of the provincial bourgeoisie than in the realities of early nineteenth-century elite conduct. However, the difficulties male aristocrats encountered in negotiating the norms of bourgeois restraint are evident in a fascinating attempt by Nancy Ellenberger to recover the subjective and interior worlds of the fin-de-siécle patrician and politician, George Wyndham. Wyndham was a cultured man, whose enthusiasm for Shelley, Scott, and Browning allowed him to adopt the persona of aristocrat-as-man-of-feeling, an imaginative romantic who rejected the stifling decorum and narrow expertise of the middle-class meritocrat. However, by the Edwardian era, a penchant for sentimentality suggested foppishness, and Wyndham (like his contemporary and fellow ‘Soul’, Arthur Balfour) was obliged to purge his public speeches of the rhetorical flourishes for which he had once been famous. However, Wyndham was less successful in maintaining the sexual continence commended by bourgeois propriety. Indeed his frequent extramarital affairs were celebrated as a reaction against middle-class ‘narrow-mindedness’. Ellenberger suggests that the enormous living spaces of aristocratic country houses and town residences, and the greater opportunities they had for travel, permitted men of the landed elite to flee domesticity more easily than their middle-class equivalents. Wyndham’s growing defensiveness in his last years suggested an aristocratic order under

36 For example, Richard Hillary, *The last enemy* (London, 1942).
37 Joanna Bourke, *An intimate history of killing: face-to-face killing in twentieth-century warfare* (London, 1999), is only partly concerned with the Second World War, and is (as its title implies) exclusively interested in a single (albeit important) aspect of the military experience.
sacrifice, but the triumph of middle-class conceptions of masculinity should not be overstated. Judging from the popularity of the music hall character ‘Champagne Charlie’ or the indulgent attitude taken towards Lord Palmerston’s sexual adventures by working-class London Liberals, unrestrained aristocratic masculinity was not without its attractions among the Victorian masses. In the 1860s and 1870s, the sensual instincts and passions of the old-style ‘gentleman leader’ such as Henry Hunt or Feargus O’Connor, were increasingly eclipsed by the disinterested executive government of a Bright or a Gladstone. However, men of patrician background remained prominent in public life well into the twentieth century, and their aristocratic inheritance offered the possibility of survival to an earthier, more flamboyant, brand of politics. The most obvious example here is Winston Churchill, whose Falstaffian sensibility, swashbuckling style, and exaggeratedly epic rhetoric recalled an earlier, more robust, age of statecraft. While Churchill was in many senses unrepresentative—the sedate masculinity of Baldwin or Attlee was more normative in mid-twentieth-century politics—the fact that, by the 1950s, he had been elevated to the uncontested status of the ‘greatest living Englishman’ raises problems for those (like the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer) who insisted that English masculinity was signified by a personal style rooted in bourgeois restraint and understatement. Much more research needs to be undertaken on the creative tension between aristocratic and bourgeois varieties of masculinity, especially since the twentieth century saw the notion of the ‘gentleman’ enlarged to embrace a much broader social cross-section of the male population. Royal masculinity could also be positioned within this discursive dialogue, encapsulating as it does a variety of male archetypes: an aristocratic roué (Edward VII), the ‘bourgeois’ family man (George V and George VI), or the dynastic paladin with a self-conscious commitment to modernity and technology (Earl Mountbatten or Prince Philip).

How far middle-class masculinities were either embraced or repudiated by working-class men also requires more sustained attention. John Springhall’s examination of the Boys Brigades between 1880 and 1914 reveals the difficulties of promoting public school-derived conceptions of ‘character’ and ‘Christian manliness’ among working-class adolescents, while Pamela Walker demonstrates that working-class recruits to the Salvation Army found their insistence that it was more manly to eschew, rather than engage in, fighting or drinking, was met with derision and allegations of effeminacy in some plebeian neighbourhoods. However, David Vincent’s study of nineteenth-century working-class autobiographies suggested a fashioning of selfhood which echoed the strictures of bourgeois moral manliness: self-restraint, self-improvement, stern propriety, and the support of, and consideration for, wives and children.

Joyce’s challenging reading of the diary of the Rochdale plebeian autodidact Edwin Waugh also confirms that the pursuit of ‘independence’ and commitment to the moral life had wide currency among working men in the industrial cities.\(^{15}\) However, such autobiographies can only illuminate the sensibilities of self-taught workers, activists, and leaders, working-class men for whom manual work was less important to their sense of self-identification than their political or literary careers. The recovery of the behaviour and subjectivities of the great mass of labouring men will require extensive research, and an alertness to variations created by skill, age, region, religion, and whether the worker inhabited a community where there was an established tradition of female employment.\(^{16}\) A particular lacuna in the history of working-class masculinity is the impact of the interwar slump. Sociological and psychological observations undertaken during the 1930s recession indicated that job losses created a sense of powerlessness among manual workers which was deeply emasculating at both personal and collective levels.\(^{17}\) It would not be too presumptuous to assume that mass unemployment in the staple industries of 1930s Britain had a similar impact on masculine identity and gender relations in the household.\(^{18}\)

As well as extending the history of masculinity to include consideration of the aristocracy and the working classes, national, ethnic, and racial differences also need to be more regularly factored into discussions of what it meant ‘to be a man’ in nineteenth or twentieth-century Britain. Despite the emergence of both the ‘new British history’ (which attempts to grant full significance to the non-English components of the United Kingdom) and extensive studies of the dynamics of racial identity within the British Empire, the ways in which the masculinity of the Welsh, Scots, or Irish, of Jews, of the settler populations of the white dominions, or of people of colour in both the colonies and the metropolis were registered and understood has only just begun to be addressed. Masculinity was certainly appropriated in the narratives of ethnic and racial ‘otherness’ which underpinned British imperialism. David Alderson has used the writings of Carlyle, Robert Knox, and Matthew Arnold to map the stereotypes of Irish masculinity – as given over to irrationality, exaggeration, and ‘feminine’ sentimentality – which informed the anti-Hibernian prejudices of the British cultural and political elite during the Famine and Fenian eras.\(^{19}\) Mrinalini Sinha’s fascinating interrogation of the Ilbert Bill controversy in 1883–4 reveals that British superiority over their Indian subjects was expressed in terms of the distinction


\(^{17}\) Arthur Brittain, Masculinity and power (Oxford, 1989).


\(^{19}\) David Anderson, Masculines fine: religion, manliness and imperialism in nineteenth-century British culture (Manchester, 1998).
between the self-controlled and ‘manly’ Englishman and the over-emotional and ‘effeminate’ Bengali. However, what Sinha also reveals, in an impressive deployment of the theoretical innovations of Homi Bhabha, is how Bengali men contested these stereotypes. They accepted charges of effeminacy, but argued these traits were not innate, but were the product of the subordination they were forced to endure under British rule, and sought a return to ‘authentic’ Indian manliness through competitive sports and a physical culture movement. Likewise, the Irish nationalists of the Gaelic Athletic Association used sport to construct an image of the Irishman, not as the lazy, over-emotional brute of the English imagination, but as one who matched physical strength with self-discipline, his enthusiasm tempered by a firm commitment to the rules and patterns of ‘scientific’ play. Such case studies of how masculinity came to be used as a means to dramatize racial or national difference in the late nineteenth century desperately need to be supplemented by the investigation of how these cultural constructions responded to decolonization and its aftermath in the twentieth century. One fascinating aspect of a highly ambitious discussion by Peter Hansen of celebrations to mark the ascent of Mount Everest in 1953 is how, in New Zealand, Edmund Hillary’s achievement was articulated as the triumph of an unpretentiously modest and naturally rugged masculinity appropriate to a young Commonwealth nation which was seeking to distance itself from the social conservatism of the mother country. Such studies of the reconfiguration of masculine hierarchies on the margins of empire during its death throes need to be matched by a concerted effort to map the interrelationship between masculinity and race which existed in the metropolis, in particular, the representation, and self-presentation, of the masculinities of those men of colour who settled in Britain in the aftermath of decolonization in the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent. Cultural histories of post-war racial identities in Britain have suggested that the distasteful stereotypes of imperialism – that men of colour were more ‘childish’ and ‘excitable’ than whites, or more sexually promiscuous – remained disturbingly resilient in the tortured early years of Britain’s emergence as a multi-cultural society, but there is much work still to be done here. Another profitable line of inquiry would be to chart how the masculinities of various national ‘others’ were presented in times of war. For example, how far was the ‘temperate masculinity’ of Britons during the Second World War discussed by Sonya Rose deliberately counterpoised with the noisy hyper-masculinity of Nazi Germany, with the ‘excitability’ of the Italians and with the ‘coldheartedness’ of the Japanese? Michele Cohen’s original and urbane study of how French masculinities were frequently (if rarely favourably) contrasted with those of the British male in the eighteenth century provides a useful model of how such an inquiry could be constituted.

It is almost a commonplace in reviews of the research undertaken in a relatively new sub-discipline to conclude that the literature is partial and fragmented. This assertion

certainly holds true in regard to the study of modern British masculinity. In addition to the lacunae already referred to, there is a pressing need for more studies of masculinity and politics after 1918, of male sexualities, of men and consumption, of the relationship between male selfhood and modernity (especially the shift from ‘character’ to ‘personality’), of changing representations of masculinity in the media of popular culture. Historians of British masculinity should be encouraged to engage more fully with queer history, for, as Ed Cohen, Patrick Higgins, and Chris Waters have all emphasized, the policing of gay sexuality narrowed the range of masculine identities and behaviours permitted to all men in modern Britain. There also needs to be a meaningful dialogue between the history of masculinity and the history of the emotions. Few historians of modern Britain have matched William Reddy’s insistence, in his pioneering study of honour and emotion in early nineteenth-century France, that the history of public masculine codes and practices needs to take more account of the ‘male world of feeling’. The history of masculinity in Britain remains less developed than that of the United States, where historians have broached such novel issues as the relationship of masculinity to foreign and diplomatic policy, and the place of manhood in the myths of state formation. British masculinity, moreover, still lacks an authoritative single volume history on the lines of E. Anthony Rotundo’s American manhood. However, judging from the quality of the works discussed in this review, it is a field whose future growth and vitality is assured. John Tosh’s insistence that the history of masculinity must be more than the history of homosocial manliness has made possible a more fully rounded exploration of male lives and subjectivities than that which existed previously. Provided that his commendable desire to ensure that men’s identities are studied in relation to those of women is accompanied by a degree of scepticism towards unproblematic chronologies of male domestication, and provided the multiple ambiguities present in the world of male imaginings are more fully registered, the history of modern British masculinity will surely continue to flourish in the years to come.

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55 Happily some work has already appeared on these topics. For example, Lesley A. Hall, Hidden anxieties: male sexuality, 1900–1950 (Cambridge, 1991); Christopher Breward, The hidden consumer: masculinities, fashion and city life, 1860–1914 (Manchester, 1999); Frank Mort, Cultures of consumption: masculinities and social space in late twentieth-century Britain (London, 1996); Andrew Spicer, Typical men: the representation of masculinity in popular British cinema (London, 2001).


60 E. Anthony Rotundo, American manhood: transformations in masculinity from the revolution to the modern era (New York, 1993).