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ELF 2007-10-27

Victorian Women

A review of a book by Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair

In their compelling new history of women, family and society in Victorian Britain, Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair attempt to unpick the stereotypical image of the Victorian woman—that 19th-century figure typically recounted as cowed, domesticated, and socially introverted. More particularly, the authors seek to dismantle the idea that middle-class identity was a gendered phenomenon necessarily experienced differently by men and women. Instead, Gordon and Nair investigate a diverse range of sources concerning the lives of the middle classes in Glasgow to develop a very different picture of the Victorian bourgeois domain. At its polemical core is the contention that the women of the Victorian city led just as public lives as their husbands, sons or fathers.

Focusing on the business world, philanthropic activities, public service and domestic rhythms of the families inhabiting the newly built terraces of Glasgow's West End, this study provides a highly detailed insight into mid- to late-Victorian middle-class life. For example, in a wonderful chapter drawing on Lord Kelvin's recollections of his earliest years, Gordon and Nair imaginatively debunk the image of the distant Victorian father to posit instead a remarkable degree of emotional sophistication.

Similarly, the separate spheres of home and work, family and business, are shown to be a rather more fluid terrain than perhaps previously thought. Business discussions took place within the home, as Glasgow's kin capitalism necessarily meant family meetings could naturally take a more commercial turn. Meanwhile, domestic entertainment was often as much about civic engagement and public life as a private celebration of the nuclear family. For the women of Glasgow's West End were not stay-at-home priestesses of the hearth, but actively engaged in a competing array of social and extended family circles which often involved a high degree of conviviality and networking.

Throughout their discussion, Gordon and Nair are keen to expose the unacknowledged involvement of women in Victorian civil society and their role in the cultural construction of middle-class identity. In Glasgow, women played a highly active part in the myriad associations and activities which helped to define the Victorian bourgeois mentality. 'Because "middle-classness" resided in such attributes, attendance at concerts and exhibitions became more than a pleasure: it was her work and she took it seriously.' Such seriousness of purpose extended even to shopping and entertainment—all of which were crucial signifiers in the development of a distinctive middle-class identity.

Such a methodological approach is certainly welcome within the existing literature on the Victorian urban world, which all too frequently underplays the relationships of women to the public sphere. Yet within this rewarding social history, the authors occasionally overplay their hand. For outside of philanthropy, Glasgow's mid-Victorian civic scene, as with so many other 19th-century cities, remained determinedly male, even though this had begun to shift by the latter decades of the century.

Within the authors' time frame, there is also room for doubt about attributing such a strong role to female involvement in the initial creation of middle-class identity. By the 1880s and 1890s, it was perhaps more a question of class affirmation. Nonetheless, Gordon and Nair have produced a highly scholarly and readable history which not only qualifies some of the traditional analyses of the period, but also contributes to the growing body of work on the Victorian middle class, which makes the subject one of the most exciting areas of cultural, social and intellectual history of today.

TRISTRAM HUNT, HISTORY TODAY

Questions

1. **What is suggested about Victorian women in the first paragraph?**

- A They have often been described in oversimplified terms
- B Their restricted social role explains their lack of interest in public matters
- C They should be seen mainly as victims of prejudiced male attitudes
- D Their influence outside the home has been exaggerated by earlier historians

2. **What is the main purpose of Gordon and Nair's book?**

- A To establish differences between men and women in Victorian times
- B To show the influence of gender on Victorian society at large
- C To question commonly held views on the Victorian middle class
- D To demonstrate the social narrow-mindedness of the Victorians

3. **Which of the following statements about life among the Victorian middle classes is true, according to Gordon and Nair?**

- A Fathers were not supposed to show much affection for their children
- B Family life tended to include matters of a more public nature
- C Business transactions were often conducted by women
- D Women had limited contact with other women outside their families

4. **How does the reviewer react to Gordon and Nair's main argument?**

- A He doubts that 19th-century Glasgow can provide any support for it
- B He believes it applies only to a limited part of Victorian social life
- C He can see some proof of its validity as early as the mid-19th century
- D He thinks it conforms to a traditional view of male class interests

5. **What is the reviewer's general impression of Gordon and Nair's book?**

- A It provides a revolutionary account of a much-neglected period
- B Its lack of an in-depth analysis of cultural issues limits its value
- C It helps to throw new light on a fascinating field of research
- D Its chief merit is its detailed account of Victorian life in Glasgow

In the Name of Science

In 1950 Martin Gardner published an article entitled “The Hermit Scientist,” about what we would today call pseudoscientists. In 1952 he expanded it into a book called *In the Name of Science*. Published by Putnam, the book sold so poorly that it was quickly remaindered and lay dormant until 1957, when it was republished by Dover. It is still in print and is arguably *the* skeptic classic of the past half a century. Thankfully, there has been some progress since Gardner offered his first criticisms of pseudoscience. Now largely antiquated are his chapters on believers in a flat earth, a hollow earth, Atlantis, etc. But disturbingly, a good two thirds of the book’s contents are relevant today, including Gardner’s discussions of medical quackery, handwriting analysis, and theories of group racial differences.

The “hermit scientist,” a youthful Gardner wrote, works alone and is ignored by mainstream scientists. “Such neglect, of course, only strengthens the convictions of self-declared genius.” But Gardner was wrong by half in his prognostications: “The current flurry of discussion about Velikovsky and Hubbard will soon subside.” Adherents to Immanuel Velikovsky’s views on how celestially caused global catastrophes shaped the beliefs of ancient humans are a quaint few surviving in the interstices of fringe culture. L. Ron Hubbard, however, has been canonized by the Church of Scientology as the founding saint of a world religion.

In 1952 Gardner could not have known that the nascent flying saucer craze would turn into an alien industry: “Since flying saucers were first reported in 1947, countless individuals have been convinced that the earth is under observation by visitors from another planet.” Absence of evidence then was no more a barrier to belief than it is today, and ufologists proffered the same conspiratorial explanations for the dearth of proof.

Even then Gardner was bemoaning that some beliefs never seem to go out of vogue. He cautions that when religious superstition should be on the wane, it is easy “to forget that thousands of high school teachers of biology,

in many of our southern states, are still afraid to teach the theory of evolution for fear of losing their jobs.” Today creationism has spread northward and mutated into the oxymoronic form of “creation science.”

What I find especially valuable about Gardner’s views are his insights into the differences between science and pseudoscience. On the one extreme we have ideas that are most certainly false, “such as the view that a one-day-old embryo can make sound recordings of its mother’s conversation.” Then there are “theories advanced as working hypotheses, but highly debatable because of the lack of sufficient data.” Of these Gardner selects a most propitious example: “the theory that the universe is expanding.” That theory would now fall at the other extreme end of the spectrum, where lie “theories almost certainly true, such as the belief that the earth is round or that men and beasts are distant cousins.”

How can we tell if someone is a scientific crank? Gardner offers this advice: (1) “First and most important of these traits is that cranks work in almost total isolation from their colleagues.” Cranks typically do not understand how the scientific process operates—that they need to try out their ideas on colleagues, attend conferences and publish their hypotheses in peer-reviewed journals before announcing to the world their startling discovery. (2) “A second characteristic of the pseudoscientist, which greatly strengthens his isolation, is a tendency toward paranoia.”

We should keep Gardner’s views in mind when we explore controversial ideas on the borderlands of science. “If the present trend continues,” Gardner concludes, “we can expect a wide variety of these men, with theories yet unimaginable, to put in their appearance in the years immediately ahead. They may achieve a following of one—or one million. In any case, it will be well for ourselves and for society if we are on our guard against them.” So we still are. That is what skeptics do.

MICHAEL SHERMER, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

Questions

6. What are we told about Martin Gardner's book in the first paragraph?

- A Most of it is now of interest principally for historical reasons
- B Despite a bad start commercially, its reputation has remained unchallenged over the years
- C To judge by its contents, there is nothing to indicate that it appeared more than fifty years ago
- D It was given very negative reviews when it was first published

7. What is implied about Gardner's ability to foresee future developments?

- A His level of accuracy is hardly remarkable
- B He is right more often than he is wrong
- C He shows little interest in making predictions
- D His talent for precise guessing is striking

8. What is suggested in connection with Gardner's discussion of flying saucers and certain religious beliefs?

- A Today very few people would question his views on them
- B Neither case is relevant to today's discussions of pseudoscience
- C Both cases show there is now a greater public demand for scientific proof
- D Basic attitudes have not changed radically since the 1950s

9. Which of the following statements is best in agreement with Gardner's opinions about science and pseudoscience?

- A Pseudoscience usually deals with phenomena beyond scientific explanation
- B A scientific theory may benefit from pseudo-scientific notions, but not the other way round
- C Scientific explanation is based on factual evidence, pseudoscience on belief with dubious proof
- D It is hardly possible to distinguish a scientific hypothesis from pseudoscience

10. What is the writer's main impression of Gardner?

- A Some of his ideas now seem even more controversial than they used to
- B His attitude to and examples of real science need updating
- C Most of his warnings have been ignored by today's scientists
- D His arguments against pseudoscience will always remain valid

AND HERE ARE SOME SHORTER TEXTS:

Indian Films

An older woman – younger man relationship, or a neglected wife seeking sex elsewhere, is increasingly epitomising the “bold” face of Hindi cinema. But are the films exploring or exploiting women’s sexual identity? Trade observers say though the marked change in the way women are projected on-screen by Bollywood is welcome, the change is superficial and the reasons are economic.

Question

11. What is implied here about Indian films today versus yesterday?

- A Indian cinema-goers are unlikely to have noticed much difference
- B The motives behind most new, sexually challenging roles for women are questionable
- C Many people tend to regard recent films as much too daring
- D Commercial interests remain opposed to films about women’s sexual experiences

Vaccine Controversy

The doctor whose research sparked the controversy over links between autism and combined vaccination against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) faces possible investigation for research misconduct. He has been accused of failing to disclose funding from lawyers seeking damages for parents who claimed their children had been damaged by the vaccine.

Question

12. What is suggested here?

- A The doctor’s research may not have been totally objective
- B There is still some evidence connecting MMR vaccination to autism
- C Lawyers are suspected of having tried to stop MMR vaccination
- D There is convincing proof that the doctor cheated in his research

Population Projections

Population projections are an art, not a science. Policy planners are not paying enough attention to the ageing population as it is. Britain needs to grasp three thorny pension challenges: raising retirement age; compulsory company contributions; and mandatory individual contributions. Health and social services are already familiar with the challenge.

Question

13. What is implied here?

- A Tomorrow’s old-age pensioners will stay healthy longer than today
- B There is too little awareness of the pension problems lying ahead
- C In the future old people are likely to accept lower pensions than today
- D Pensions will remain the full responsibility of the government alone

Gay Men, Straight Women

Contradicting previous US research, the first ever British study on the subject claims that heterosexual women play increasingly important roles in the lives of UK homosexuals. The report, by academics from London South Bank University, suggests gay men are fed up with what is claimed is a “bitchy” and “backstabbing” gay community, and straight women feel dissatisfied with the sexual undertones in friendships with heterosexual men.

Historical Evidence

The Western concept of history is not completely uniform. Oral historians have long been challenging notions of what constitutes valid historical evidence. And in championing the values of oral evidence—initially dismissed by some historians as unreliable—they have done much to highlight elements of partiality and subjectivity in all kinds of historical evidence.

Question

14. What is implied here?

- A The situation in Britain is part of an international trend
- B Gay men and straight women in the UK have always liked each other
- C The British research findings have hardly come as a surprise
- D Friendships between UK gay men and straight women are on the rise

Question

15. What is said here?

- A Only written documents should be allowed in historical research
- B Oral evidence is now accepted by nearly all Western historians
- C Neither written nor oral evidence is completely objective
- D Oral historians have overstated the usefulness of their sources

In the following text there are gaps which indicate that something has been left out. Look at the four alternatives that correspond to each gap and decide which one best fits the gap. Then mark your choice on your answer sheet.

Roots of Anxiety

Researchers would like to learn what role our genes, as opposed to our environment, play in the development of anxiety. “It has been known for some time that these disorders run in families,” says Kenneth Kendler, a psychiatric geneticist at Virginia Commonwealth University. “So the next logical question is the nature-nurture **16**_____” In other words, are anxious people born that way, or do they become anxious as a result of their life experiences?

Kendler and his colleagues approached the question by studying groups of identical twins, who share virtually all their genes, and fraternal twins, who, **17**_____ any other siblings, share only some of them. What Kendler’s group found was that both identical twins were somewhat more likely than both fraternal twins to suffer from generalized anxiety disorder, phobias or panic attacks.

The correlation isn’t 100%, however. “Most of the heritability is in the range of 30% to 40%,” Kendler says. That’s a fairly moderate genetic **18**_____, he notes. “Your genes set your general vulnerability,” he concludes. “You can be a low-vulnerable, intermediate-vulnerable or a high-vulnerable person.” But your upbringing and your experiences still have a major role to play. Someone with a low genetic vulnerability, for example, could easily **19**_____ a fear of flying after surviving a horrific plane crash. Samuel Lepastier, a psychiatrist at Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, agrees. Similarly, “a child brought up in a climate of insecurity will be much more likely to suffer from anxiety than someone brought up in a secure environment,” he says.

There is plenty to learn about how anxiety and fear shape the brain. One of the biggest mysteries is the relationship between anxiety and depression. Researchers know that adults who suffer from depression were often very anxious as children. (It’s also true that many kids outgrow their anxiety disorders to become perfectly well-adjusted adults.) Is that just **20**_____, as many believe, or does anxiety somehow prime the brain to become depressed later in life?

CHRISTINE GORMAN, TIME

Alternatives

16.

- A disease
- B measure
- C issue
- D mentality

17.

- A unlike
- B regarding
- C despite
- D like

18.

- A application
- B structure
- C impact
- D environment

19.

- A overcome
- B relieve
- C imagine
- D develop

20.

- A sheer luck
- B a coincidence
- C totally wrong
- D too late