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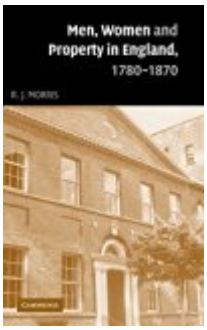

R. J. Morris. *Men, Women and Property in England, 1780-1870: A Social and Economic History of Family Strategies amongst the Leeds Middle Classes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xiii + 455 pp. $95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-83808-5.

Linda Young. *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America, Australia and Britain.* Houndmills and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xi + 245 pp. $95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-333-99746-8.

Reviewed by Brian Lewis

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Yet another doorstopper about the Leeds middle classes? R. J. Morris began studying them back in the 1960s and along the way he has squeezed out of them an Oxford D.Phil. thesis, numerous articles, and a major book (*Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class: Leeds, 1820-1850*, 1990), establishing in the process his credentials as the foremost interpreter of the nineteenth-century middle classes in Britain. Surely, by now, he has milked them dry?

No, actually. His latest substantial tome is a testimony to the rewards that can be derived from digging ever deeper (switching metaphors from milking to mining) in a very rich seam. This book does not revolutionize our understanding of British society during the industrial revolution. Nor, unlike some previous blockbuster studies of the middle classes (his own included), does it address big questions like how the British managed to avoid revolution and create a reasonably viable liberal-capitalist society. Nor does it give much sense of the traumas and transformation of the city. It eschews politics and religion. It is not, nor is it intended to be, a rounded picture of middle-class life and contributions. It is, as its title suggests, a dissection of family strategies regarding property among the Leeds middle classes: a revealing and accomplished piece of scrupulously researched scholarship, adding significantly to our understanding of what made these people tick.

Morris begins with a vignette of Joseph Henry Oates and his family in 1826, the first of his fascinating case studies. These were people who lived, in many respects, privileged and contented lives, their daily concerns far removed from the struggles of the bulk of their fellow citizens to make ends meet. Yet their lives were also insecure, not only because of periodic economic maelstroms such as the banking failures of 1826 but also because of the fragility of the human body: the threat of premature death or of energy-sapping, debilitating, long-term illness. The individual faced God and the market: both had the habit of acting unpredictably, however virtuous or careful one might be. It was therefore vital to anticipate vulnerabilities and the enormous fluctuations of responsible middle-class male income by diversifying capital resources, tending family networks, and paying close attention to the vagaries of trade and investment.

Means for the mediation and distribution of risk, commonplace later on, were still rudimentary in the early nineteenth century. Life assurance, for example, was little used because of its imperfections; national and international stock markets were ill regulated and dependent on wholly inadequate flows of information for careful investors; the limited liability company to shield from commercial risk only became a reliable option late in the nineteenth century; pensions were still handouts from the government to placemen or other forms of reward tainted by the whiff of corruption; and well-developed, transparent, predictable salary scales had to await the expansion of the professional, governmental, and managerial sectors towards the end of the century. In short, only the family could mediate and spread risk and insecurity during the first seventy years of the nineteenth century. Only from about that time was there some liberation of capital investments, careers, and ambitions from the family network and the local. The cultural and structural authority of the male-led networked family was going to take generations more to unwind fully.

Morris derives much of his evidence for family strategies from 374 wills from the Parish of Leeds, probated in the early 1830s, supplemented by family papers and property records. The will provided for a settling of accounts. Its first stipulation was the payment of debts or other outstanding charges, essential for the individual's posthumous reputation and the family name. The second concern for a man with a family was to provide for his widow and minor children; the third was to treat all surviving children equally, male and female, eldest and youngest, with any disparities of earlier support ironed out. This principle of partible inheritance clearly distinguished the middle classes from the gentry and aristocracy and their practice of primogeniture. Its purpose was not only to avoid family disputes and to spread risk but also to make it highly likely that each heir would have to work for a living rather than retire from active business. To this end, most wills showed no particular concern for the family house (again a distinguishing feature from the upper-class landed family and, at the other end of the scale, the peasant) or even for the continuity of the business. All property, goods, and securities of these "cash economy capitalists," as Morris calls them, were to be liquidated, turned into cash, in the interests of equitable redistribution. If there were no living children, the testator drew upon the "reserve army" of cousins, siblings, nephews, and nieces.

Morris pays a lot of attention to the family network and the ways in which strength came through the diversity not only of one's own assets at different stages of the life- and property-cycle but also through the occupational and geographical diversity of the network. Most networks had a London connection and all relied on the active intervention of women. In spite of the prescriptions of the ideology of domesticity, and the increasing tightening on female participation in public space,

widows and spinsters acted as influential agents in the maintenance of networks. The trust, created by the will, was another critical factor in the diversification of income and provided a paradoxical role for women in the economy, since a significant number of women entered marriage with an independent and protected income. The wishes of one male, the father, to transmit posthumous influence compromised the subordination of the wife to the husband, leaving a fragment of economic independence even within marriage.

Morris takes us through the varying strategies at each stage of the middle-class property cycle. He discovers that in spite of vast occupational and status differences, the middle classes from the opulent merchant down to the humble shopkeeper, all sought to eliminate debt and to move from active to passive forms of income: from relatively high risk, high maintenance means of building up commercial, manufacturing, or professional capital to low risk investments with minimal management to provide a stable income for old age and for widows and children. "Urban peasants," typically independent craftsman or shopkeepers, focused on accumulating bundles of local real estate, where they could assess the opportunities and risks at first hand. For a successful member of the middle class, in the later rentier phase of the property cycle, capital accumulation slowed and unearned income from rents, loans, government stock, and railway and public utility shares predominated. During the difficult 1830s and 1840s the search for rentier assets was particularly challenging, which is why the proliferation of railway shares proved such a boon. These shares and the accumulation of substantial urban property assets in the growing towns enabled a greater middle-class separation from the local agricultural economy, making possible expanded support for the Anti-Corn Law League. The greater indications of middle-class class-consciousness that this represented, Morris suggests in one of a number of intriguing asides, was a product of anxiety rather than self-confidence.

Social class remains important to Morris in analyzing inequalities of power and access to material resources. Although he sees a real distinction between the gentry and the middle classes, at the lower end he argues for constant movement on the class boundary, and few distinctions between middle-class and working-class culture. Class ran through people's lives. A very large segment of the population personally mixed "working-class" or "bourgeois" elements, wandering in and out of wage labor or collecting rentier income.

Linda Young's take on the middle classes is rather different. She has set herself the hugely ambitious task of summarizing nineteenth-century middle-class culture in Australia, America, and Britain in two hundred pages. Her book is perceptive, theoretically sophisticated, and a useful addition to the middle-class history library. But she has undertaken an exercise that encourages lumping and the homogenization of her chosen group and inserts unrealistically sharp breaks from those outside the middle-class circle.

Young's argument is that a new culture of middle-class gentility crystallized in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries under the influences of an urban-industrial economy, the spread of wealth, and Evangelical religiosity. This culture was international in scope. One sees similar middle-class genteel values, behavior, and material worlds across "Greater Britain." Australia's penal-colony complications and the republican ethos of post-revolutionary America made little impact on the universality of middle-class aspiration and expression in all three countries. And within the middle classes, the different strata produced only differences in degree: all sought to live the genteel life by exercising supreme self control, by adopting similar mannerisms and rules of etiquette, and by accumulating similar possessions. She wheels in heavy guns like E. P. Thompson and

Pierre Bourdieu to support her sense of how classes make themselves and build social capital through forms of group behavior that distinguish themselves from others. She also acknowledges a considerable debt to other big-hitters like Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (***Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1750-1850***, 1987) and their sense of a cultural class-consciousness transcending political and economic divisions.

Young, trained as a historian, but a museum curator by profession, is strongest when she is dealing with material culture. She provides a fine range of examples illustrating attitudes towards hygiene, posture, manners, etiquette, and taste in clothing and furnishings. Less compelling is her take on class, more precisely her argument that a coherent sense of middle-class identity, distinct from aristocratic courtliness and working-class respectability, developed despite the vast internal economic differences and the absence of any form of unity in the public sphere. Certainly the forces for cohesion and the similarities across continents were profound; but they only show up so strikingly when the differences are systematically downplayed or ignored, as they are in this book. My own examination of the urban elites in the Lancashire cotton towns of Blackburn, Bolton, and Preston (***The Middlemost and the Milltowns: Bourgeois Culture and Politics in Early Industrial England***, 2001) discovered that the divisions and fissures are just as impressive, just as interesting, and just as important, even in cultural terms and even among a more narrowly defined group, as are the unifying factors.

Such a microscopic treatment of the middle classes and a sense of fuzziness and ambiguity at class boundaries is precisely what a parachutist like Young, surveying the transnational landscape, is seeking to avoid. She is to be commended for taking the larger view. (She could, perhaps, have looked more widely still, and addressed the question whether this "middle-class culture" was specific to "Greater Britain" or whether it was a broader European phenomenon.) Still, it will probably take more than her brief book to persuade readers that, say, the wealthy Tory-Anglican physician in Leeds and the marginal Baptist shopkeeper in Sydney had or felt they had more in common than those above or below them in the social scale.

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