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Billie Melman. *The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past 1800-1953.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. xii + 363 pp. $125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-929688-0.

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B. Melman: The Culture of History

Since the 1980s, the history of historiography and the cultural relevance of the past in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain have received a lot of attention. In fact, it may seem as if the explorers of these fields, including renowned scholars like Peter Mandler or John W. Burrow, have not left much space for innovative analyses. Melman offers a helpful survey of seminal works (p. 6ff.). As far as the Victorian period is concerned, one could also mention von Arx, Jeffrey Paul, Progress and Pessimism. Religion, Politics, and History in Late Nineteenth Century Britain, Cambridge, Mass. 1985; Chapman, Raymond, The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature, London 1986; Culler, Arthur Dwight, The Victorian Mirror of History, New Haven, Conn., London 1985; and: Jann, Rosemary, The Art and Science of Victorian History, Columbus 1985. Billie Melman, Professor of History at Tel Aviv University, sets out to correct this impression with a refreshing study on nothing less than the emergence, continuities and modifications of an "English popular culture of history" (p. 10) between 1802 and 1953.

Melman has organised her nine chapters in five thematic sections, preceded by an introduction in which she gives a useful account of her approach. She puts a question mark against the widely held view that English attitudes towards the past have pre-eminently been both ruralist and confident. Moreover, she argues that the role of history has too often been interpreted merely as a question of power and control. Melman intends to reveal the limits of such views by showing that history was frequently seen as both urban and violent, and by pointing out the complex varieties and dynamics that belonged to popular representations of the past. Within this framework, she is particularly concerned with the visual aspects of history and with questions of gender.

In order to give substance to her claims, Melman explores a multitude of facets. The first part of her journey through 150 years of "emergence, circulation, and resonances of history" (p. 17) deals with nineteenth-century treatments of the French Revolution. In what is probably the most fascinating chapter of the work, she shows that the success of Madame Tussaud's wax museum, whose collection included the heads of several French victims guillotined during the Great Terror of 1793/94, was mainly based on the attraction of history as a time of horror. A different way of presenting the past is at the centre of the second chapter: in his work The French Revolution (1837), Thomas Carlyle's solution to coming to terms with the scope of urban events in France was to choose the bird's-eye view of an omniscient and prophetic narrator. Charles Dickens's novel A Tale of Two Cities (1859), which reveals that the prison, the scaffold, and urban disorder were central to the Victorian historical imagination, is then introduced as a particularly effective blow to the thesis of mid-Victorian complacency.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on notions of the Tudor period from the 1830s into the twentieth century. Whereas other scholars agree that the early modern past was imagined as rural and largely harmonious, Melman claims that horror frequently took centre stage. In order to prove this, she explores the changing accessibility, status, and image of the Tower of London. In particular, she refers to the immense impact of The Tower of London (1840), an illustrated historical novel by William Harrison Ainsworth and George Cruikshank, which "constructed [the Tower] as a site of imprisonment and torture" (p. 139). Discussing this work under the aspect of gender, Melman argues that Ainsworth's presentation of the fate of Lady Jane Grey offered a domesticated and feminized version of violence, punishment, and the prison.

The next two chapters deal with "Elizabethan revivals, consumption, and mass democracy in the modern century" (p. 183). Accompanied by some enthusiasm for the Empire and a change of attitudes towards state power, the Elizabethan revival, starting in the late nine-

teenth century and reaching its apex in the context of the coronation of Elizabeth II, added comforting notions of the Tudor past to its well-established overtones of crisis and violence. This came with a further democratization of historical culture, caused in particular by historical films which exerted a deep impact on popular views on history. Underlining the autonomy of film stars and their multiple roles as historical personae, stars, and historical experts, Melman presents actors like Flora Robson as "conduits to the past" (p. 215).

As the next part shows, this twentieth-century popularity of Tudor history largely coincided with a revived interest in the French Revolution. Using the Scarlet Pimpernel novels by the exiled Hungarian Baroness Emmuska Orczy as an example, Melman shows convincingly that the early twentieth century turned the formerly despised aristocracy of Georgian times into an agent of change and modernity. This was in line with the urban setting and the high speed of Orczy's narrative, elements that were also taken up by Alexander Korda's popular film version of 1935.

Before recapitulating the leitmotifs of her work in a conclusion, Melman reverts for a last time to views on the Tudor era. In contrast to her earlier examples, she now focuses on a cultural reference to the past that was not successful: despite the fact that interest in Elizabethan times reached its climax in the early fifties, Benjamin Britten's Gloriana, an opera on Elizabeth I that was state-funded and produced in direct connection with the coronation of 1953, did not meet the expectations of its audience. The failure of this opera caused a scandal and led to intensive discussions on the state's function as "culture broker" (p. 282), and on the version of history which it should support.

On the whole, there can be no doubt that Billie Melman deserves praise for her deeply researched and carefully argued chapters. It is more debatable to what degree they also substantiate her overarching theses. I particularly wonder if English views on the French Revolution and on the rule of "Bloody Mary" are the right examples for questioning the position that "British history was envisioned as more orderly, more harmonious, and more stable than other national histories"(p. 6). One could equally argue that continental upheavals and Catholic dungeons were contrastive foils that actually supported the confidence of Protestant Britons. No wonder that Melman's shift to early twentieth-century views on Elizabeth I coincided with her discovery of "another notion, attaching to history a feel of security and comfort" (p. 186) - and no wonder either that Tudor Rose, a historical film on Lady Jane Grey which was first shown in 1936, represents an exception to this development.

However, the quality of Melman's case studies more than compensates the reader for such minor problematic aspects. Melman skilfully examines a huge range of sources, and the impressive variety of her subjects gives evidence of her erudition. The detailed bibliography adds to the value of the work; but misspelt names like 'Aurbach' (for Auerbach) and 'Blass' (for Blaas) could easily have been avoided. But the greatest academic strength of this book is its concise and focused analysis: it never confronts the reader with a shallow narrative whose analytical purpose is not clear. In short, this is an inspiring work that makes a highly valuable contribution to discussions on the cultural relevance of history through time.

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