

Helen Smith. *Masculinity, Class and Same-Sex Desire in Industrial England, 1895-1957.* Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ix + 244 pp. \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-137-47099-7.

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It is hard to believe that now, after some four decades of queer historiography in Britain, studies of male same-sex desire still remain focused primarily on the metropolis. That London became a magnet for men who desired other men, and for historians who have subsequently attempted to track their every move, is now part of our intellectual landscape. Refreshing it is, then, to turn to what Helen Smith characterizes in her own excellent book as “the first detailed academic study of non-metropolitan men who desired other men in England during the period 1895-1957” (p. 2). While other historians have touched on this topic before, and while several local history projects have shed light on those same-sex desiring men who were left behind and did not seek the supposed pleasures of the metropolis, the lure of London as both a site of escape and an object of investigation remains strong. To be sure, as Smith notes, a number of US historians have pioneered new approaches to the queer past, focusing on rural and small-town American life, on its distinctive opportunities for same-sex encounters, and on the self-understanding of men who inhabited those spaces, including, most notably, John Howard in his *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (1999). Influenced by their work, Smith nevertheless turns her attention to a topic uniquely British, to male same-sex desire as embedded

in, and articulated through, the deep structures of the traditional working-class community—that world recalled by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), a book mined to very good effect by Smith, who is not immune from Hoggart’s own nostalgia for a now lost world.

Masculinity, Class and Same-Sex Desire in Industrial England is an ambitious book. It explores the lives, sexual encounters, and self-understanding of those northern, working-class men who, for more than half a century, were far removed from our own notions of “gay identity” and whose venues for sex and modes of socialization did not constitute what would, in large urban centers, eventually become known as a gay subculture. It painstakingly pieces together the lives of men who were not like us; it explores how they experienced their emotional and sexual relationships with each other in the context of the masculine workplace culture that was central in defining their position in society and how they understood themselves. In reconstructing this lost world, Smith relies heavily on the provincial press, which she reads with consummate skill, and on an array of studies of working-class life, ranging from a settlement house investigation of workers’ self-understanding in Sheffield at the end of the First World War to those numerous surveys of the decline of the traditional working-class communi-

ty penned in the 1950s. Sheffield is a major focus of her study and while one might initially wonder what else can be said about the middle-class socialist Edward Carpenter and his working-class lovers, friends, and admirers, Smith deftly and imaginatively reconstructs Carpenter's glorification of working-class comradeship in the context of the lived experience of local working-class life.

Like Matt Houlbrook in his formidable account of *Queer London* (2005), Smith begins her work with a chapter on policing and prosecutions for same-sex offences. After investigating the legal records, she concludes that same-sex activity between men did not lead to the same degree of scrutiny and regulation in the North as it did in London: "Due to the masculine working-class culture of the time and understandings of northern masculinity," she observes, "there seems to have been little anxiety about same-sex desire amongst local communities, local police or the men who did the desiring. It was simply not important as an issue" (p. 126). Finding no trace of any homosexual offences tried in the Magistrates Court or at the Quarter Sessions in Sheffield between 1895 and 1905, and noting the difficulty of checking local court records throughout the North during the sixty years covered by her study, Smith turns to the records of men tried at the Assize courts instead. From these records, and comparing her figures with those provided for London by Houlbrook, she concludes that from the 1890s through the 1930s there were two or three times more men tried for sexual offences with other men in London than there were in the North—and an even greater disparity between the two regions in the 1940s and 1950s. And yet these figures are somewhat misleading. First, Houlbrook's evidence comes from London's lower courts, from the Metropolitan Magistrates Courts and the City of London Justice Rooms, making comparisons with the northern and northeastern circuits of the Assize courts dubious; it is a bit like comparing apples and oranges. Second, there exists ample evidence of sexual offences between men being tried at the

local level, at least in the later period of Smith's study (seventy-four such cases between men heard before the Quarter Sessions of the Peace in Cheshire between 1950 and 1954, for example).

Despite these caveats, Smith mines a wholly underexplored legal record and, in addition, digs further into the press accounts of the more sensational trials of the period. She has uncovered two large-scale trials that took place in 1954, for example, one in Rotherham and the other in Barnsley, both involving numerous men, almost entirely from the working class. Meticulously piecing together the story of where men met, what they did, and "how they experienced their sexuality and enacted their desire with other men" (p. 7), Smith uses such trials to make the boldest claim of her book, namely that the majority of men in the north of England who had sex with other men did not subscribe to a coherent sexual identity. It is a claim that is central to her own book and echoes Houlbrook's argument about many of the men on whom he focused in London. As Smith insists: "Until an identity is named and widely understood, for the majority of people, it does not exist" (p. 186). It certainly did not exist for most of men about whom Smith writes and she quite rightly eschews those rather tired attempts to read back a contemporary gay identity into the past. And yet more thinking needs to be done about how we can map past subjectivities without thinking in terms of identity, for at times Smith falls back on the usefulness of notions of identity that elsewhere she repudiates. She insists, for example, that the key to grasping how working men who desired other men experienced their lives "lies in understanding how they viewed their identity as men" (p. 191). But if such men did not have a self-conscious sexual identity, to what extent can we speak of their possessing a gender identity?

Smith leaves many questions such as this unanswered. Her claims are also repeated a little too often and her book needs some pruning (the passage quoted above in the first paragraph of

this review is repeated, for example, virtually verbatim, on p. 21). Moreover, the great difficulty of coming to any firm conclusions about how the men on whom Smith focuses experienced their desires leads her to an overly tentative prose at times: “One could argue ...” (p. 35); “It is easy to imagine ...” (p. 101); “One has to wonder ...” (p. 149); “It is safe to assume ...” (p. 153); “it is possible ...” (p. 153). Perhaps such caution is warranted, given the unwieldy nature of the beast with which Smith wrestles. Difficult questions often emerge from books that push the boundaries like this one. Hers is crucially important not only because it is so expansive in its chronological and geographical scope and evidentiary range but because it provocatively documents a world that appears alien to us now, a world of men who desired other men without a now familiar language of sexuality through which to articulate that desire.

What became of this world? Certainly by the 1960s one could say good-bye to all that. Smith is even more precise, suggesting that “the years from 1953 to 1956 represented a very specific moment in both police and public understanding of same-sex, which led to an increase in prosecutions and a shift in how local communities regarded men who had sex with other men” (p. 60). The corrosive effects of affluence, as described by Hoggart in his familiar story of the decline of the traditional working-class community, was partly to blame, as was a heightened emphasis on companionate marriage and new domestic pleasures and entertainments. This was a time, too, when medical theories of homosexuality that hitherto had little resonance in working-class communities became more widespread and when increased media visibility was given nationally to a now coherent image of the “homosexual” man. All conspired to reconfigure how same-sex desire was understood in working-class neighborhoods, according to Smith in an excellent analysis of the new forces at work in the 1950s and beyond. With a tinge of regret for the loss of the world she has so richly documented, she concludes that a brave

new world “that encouraged men to be gay, straight, bisexual and, later, queer often had no place for many of the men” whose stories she has just told, that “a way of life and understanding was irrevocably altered” (p. 195).

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