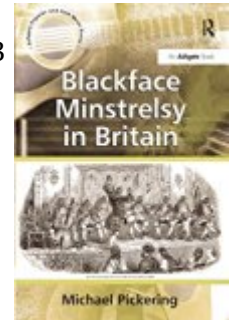


Michael Pickering. *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. xvi + 253 pp. \$99.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7546-5859-7.



Reviewed by David Lloyd Smith

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Commissioned by Mark Hampton (Lingnan University)

Reading Michael Pickering's *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*, an intriguing and multilayered academic work on a neglected chapter of British cultural history, I was reminded of an incident from childhood. My paternal grandparents were partial to the hugely popular *Black and White Minstrel Show*, which ran on British television from 1958 until 1978, and I can still remember their protestations that the show was innocuous entertainment as my socialist father remonstrated with them concerning its racist origins. Even as a child, although there seemed nothing glaringly racist about either the songs or the dress and mannerisms of the blacked-up performers, I merely found the show faintly embarrassing and antediluvian in the world of Pink Floyd and the Rolling Stones.

Now, of course, blackface entertainment has faded from popular consciousness, almost universally branded as a pariah within the history of popular music. Pickering's study stands then as an attempt to redress the scholarly neglect, although his conclusions are by no means a rehabilitation

of the genre. Blackface minstrelsy's often crude and derogatory racism is clearly delineated, with the late nineteenth-century high-water of imperialism bringing forth its most extreme manifestations. However, Pickering quite rightly discusses blackface minstrelsy in the broader context of British cultural and social history, with all its anxieties, fears, and subversions. Intriguing paradoxes emerge, in that although blackface minstrelsy cut across class lines and was seen as a form of popular entertainment to which the most respectable bourgeois could safely bring his family, it could equally on occasion serve a carnivalesque function, subverting hegemonic codes.

In short then, this is a nuanced and subtle interpretation, encompassing anthropological, sociological, historical, cultural, as well as musicological elements. Pickering charts the early nineteenth-century appropriation of American blackface minstrelsy in Britain, and its adaptation to British society and culture, and then delineates its evolution from sentimental plantation ballads to more explicitly imperialist and racist songs (often

centered on the uppity and risible “coon” stereotype), culminating in its popularity on radio in the interwar years, where misogynistic humor took precedence over belittling representations of the black Other. As Pickering makes abundantly clear, the sheer ubiquity of blackface entertainment in Britain, covering a period of more than a century, is breathtaking. It extended well beyond professional performances in concert and music halls, spilling over into the streets, beaches, country houses, and village halls of the nation, with amateur troupes enthusiastically popularizing its iconography, mannerisms, and songs. Pickering is quite right then to foreground the scholarly neglect. His explanation for this is interesting, if simple: “Most people who write about popular music choose the music they like and wish to celebrate” (p. xi). This seems plausible, although cultural historians of juvenilia, the media, and imperialistic popular fiction seem to have no reluctance to roll up their sleeves and delve deep into unpalatable subject matter. More credit to Michael Pickering then.

This is, however, a work for the specialist reader. Pickering borrows heavily from cultural theory, and on occasion his prose is opaque and even convoluted (though conversely there are occasions where it is often witty and apposite). An infelicity such as “distiniated” (p. 211), for instance, should have been bundled into a tumbril and dispatched to the guillotine.

For the first two-thirds of the book I was willing to credit it with being virtually a definitive and exhaustive history of blackface minstrelsy. Its interrelationship with—and influence upon—broader social, cultural, and political developments is excellent ... but only up to the interwar period. The shift from racist to sexist humor during the BBC radio phase of minstrelsy in the 1930s cannot simply be adequately explained by the fact that black entertainers were active participants in the show (p. 196), or the claim that black Otherness “could be said, by the 1930s and 1940s, not to

pose the same sense of threat, danger or dread as female Otherness” due to the former’s being “thoroughly domesticated, as it were, [and] was thus entirely suited to a predominant treatment in the nostalgic mode, while the latter ... became the object of comic assaults as a means of re-asserting, or rehabilitating, male mastery” (p. 212). I was disappointed that there was no discussion of how this “domestication” of the black Other could be seen in light of the shift in sensibility, wherein the establishment (at least) now considered crude racist invective to be inappropriate in an era where the aggressive, expansionist vision of empire was being supplanted by the concept of imperial stewardship, with colonies putatively being groomed for eventual (if far distant) self-rule. The subaltern was restless, and the last thing that was wanted was to aggravate him or her further with demeaning and offensive “humor.” I was disappointed too that British blackface minstrelsy’s swan song, its twenty-year stint on television, was glossed over in a few scattered, offhand sentences.

Yet overall this is a comprehensive and penetrating study of an unjustly forgotten subject, a study that, incidentally, is well supported with innumerable illuminating and evocative illustrations. I would like to conclude this review by quoting Pickering’s own final sentence, one that I feel encapsulates a fundamental error that many of the more polemical scholars in this field are wont to commit: “Cultural historians may have to look back over their shoulders, but they needn’t look down their noses as well.”

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