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0521833892 - Making English Morals: Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787–1886 - M. J. D. Roberts

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Making English Morals

Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787–1886

Campaigns for moral reform were a recurrent and distinctive feature of public life in later Georgian and Victorian England. Antislavery, temperance, charity organisation, cruelty prevention, ‘social purity’ advocates and more – all promoted their causes through the mobilisation of citizen volunteer support. This book sets out to explore the world of these volunteer networks, their foci of concern, their patterns of recruitment, their methods of operation, and the responses they aroused. In its exploration of this culture of self-consciously altruistic associational effort, the book provides the first systematic survey of moral reform movements as a distinct tradition of citizen action over the period, as well as casting light on the formation of a middle-class culture torn, in this stage of economic and political nation-building, between acceptance of a market-organised society and unease about the cultural consequences of doing so. This is a revelatory book that is both compelling and accessible.

M. J. D. ROBERTS is Associate Professor in the Department of Modern History, Macquarie University, Sydney. He is the author of numerous articles on volunteer association in the religious and philanthropic life of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and has held visiting fellowships at the University of Adelaide, the University of Edinburgh and All Souls College, Oxford.

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Preface

This is a book driven into existence by curiosity about moral change. Who decides that contemporary moral values, current standards of behaviour, are repugnant? What experiences promote this sensitivity? What experiences and mental processes trigger attempts to promote moral change – attempts often met with indifference, hostility, ridicule and failure? And under what circumstances, by what methods, do the morally sensitive manage to persuade the indifferent, and overcome the hostile, when they do achieve recognition? ‘Nothing is more difficult perhaps than to explain how and why, or why not, a new moral perception becomes effective in action. Yet nothing is more urgent if an academic historical exercise is to become a significant investigation of human behavior.’*

This, then, is a study of people seeking moral reform – and about the associations they formed, the campaigns they fought, and the responses they achieved. The leading characters will be relatively familiar to the reader. The list begins with William Wilberforce and concludes with Josephine Butler and the crusading journalist W. T. Stead. The volunteer associations which these recognised historical figures led, and relied upon to achieve their goals, will, to most, be less familiar – as will some of the goals themselves.

It is hoped that the book itself may prove useful in three ways. Given the variety of causes canvassed and the complexity of their organisation, my first purpose has been to tell a story – to establish a chronology of organised moral reform activities across the period from the later eighteenth century to the turn of the twentieth. This reconstruction of sequence gives an opportunity, not only to clarify the range and order of events, but to work towards two more explanation-focused tasks. That is, it gives an opportunity to place each moral reform initiative in precise context – to explain its appearance and evolving fortunes in terms of the context (demographic, economic, cultural, political, administrative) which moulded the perceptions and motives of those attracted to (or repelled by) the task taken up. It also gives a much-needed opportunity to integrate the study of particular causes – temperance, antislavery, social purity,

* M. I. Finley, quoted by David Brion Davis, ‘The Perils of Doing History by Ahistorical Abstraction’, in T. Bender (ed.), *The Antislavery Debate* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1992), p. 300.

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etc. – into a study of moral reform as a diverse but distinctive mode of thought and action. ‘Very little has so far been published on Victorian moral reform movements. There is no general survey of them’: thus Brian Harrison in 1974.[†] Since then there has emerged a useful (though still incomplete) range of individual movement studies and sectoral surveys, yet it remains the case that there is still no general survey of them, let alone a survey which links them to their eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century precursors and prototypes. This book aims to provide that survey.

A second way of reading the book is to read it as a contribution to the cultural history of the strata of society from which moral reform associations drew their chief support – that is, the English middle classes, especially the professional and commercial middle classes. The leaders of moral reform movements over the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, as I aim to explain, can plausibly be said to have established a ‘moral reform tradition’. By means of volunteer associational action they created and successfully transmitted across several generations a collective memory of cultural heritage and obligation, as well as a commitment to a form of public action self-consciously presented as aiming to transcend individual or sectional self-interest. That sense of obligation was particularly aroused by unease about the moral consequences of material advance.

While it has long since been recognised that the English middle classes of this period cannot adequately be ‘represented’ by an elite of industrial capitalists, the tracing of the diversity of types of middle-class cultural response to the coming of a market-organised society is still, as I understand it, very much work in progress. It is in this context that I present the study of moral reform voluntary association as a contribution to the appraisal of middle-class ambivalence towards the spread of a market-organised society. On the one hand, it can be argued, voluntary association plays a major role in a middle-class mission to promote the market-related values of self-control and self-reliance among other social groups. On the other hand, moral reform voluntary effort is also identifiable as a reaction to the ‘temptations’ of a free market in goods, services and labour; and the attitudes expressed by reformers are attitudes which register a recurrent and, in some quarters, acute, anxiety about the market’s apparent power to corrupt moral values at all social levels including their own, thus potentially ‘delegitimizing’ middle-class claims to public leadership. In this context moral reform voluntarism can be identified as a form of compensatory investment in cultural stabilisation on behalf of the class most self-consciously ‘implicated’.

[†] B. Harrison, ‘State Intervention and Moral Reform’, in P. Hollis (ed.), *Pressure from Without in Early Victorian England* (1974), p. 317.

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Finally, because of its focus on voluntary association, the book may be read as a contribution to current debate about the nature and cultural underpinning of that elusive yet desirable state of social evolution – ‘civil society’. In civil society, as political scientists present it, citizens avoid the repression and inflexibility inherent in societies organised in more authoritarian or atomised ways, instead acting in self-initiated ways which (largely inadvertently, through experimental practice) create ‘social capital greas[ing] the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly’. They do this, the argument goes, by active participation in a public life of committed, yet tolerant, trusting and (perhaps) ‘rational-critical’ interaction which both trains them in negotiation and, at the same time, curbs the ‘unmediated’ power of the state and of market forces over their lives. While the concerns that have stimulated this debate about the generation of ‘social capital’ have been aroused by perceived trends over recent generations in western societies as a whole, it has been customary to invoke a benchmark state of society for comparison which is located, historically, in the period (and, to a degree, in the society) covered by this book. The opportunity therefore arises to test, so far as evidence permits, the plausibility of the model, and also to make some attempt to evaluate the contribution of ‘associations for altruistic purposes’ to the emergence of a functioning civil society in England.

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Abbreviations

Organisations

BAPT	British Association for the Promotion of Temperance
BFTS	British and Foreign Temperance Society
CEPS	Church of England Purity Society
CETS	Church of England Temperance Society
CFS	Children’s Friend Society
COS	Charity Organisation Society
LDOS	Lord’s Day Observance Society
LFS	Labourers’ Friend Society
LNA	Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts
MRU	Moral Reform Union
NAPSS	National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (Social Science Association)
NARCD	National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
NVA	National Vigilance Association
PDS	Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders (Prison Discipline Society)
[R]SPCA	[Royal] Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
SDUK	Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge
SRM	Society for the Reformation of Manners
UKA	United Kingdom Alliance
VA	Vigilance Association for the Defence of Personal Rights (Personal Rights Association)
WVS	Workhouse Visiting Society
YMCA	Young Men’s Christian Association

Sources and publications

<i>BDEB</i>	<i>Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography</i> , ed. D. Lewis (2 vols., Oxford, 1995)
BL Add. MSS	British Library Additional Manuscripts
<i>CSHB</i>	<i>Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750–1950</i> , ed. F. M. L. Thompson (3 vols., Cambridge, 1990)
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
HC SC	Select Committee of the House of Commons
HL SC	Select Committee of the House of Lords
<i>PD</i>	<i>Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>[British] Parliamentary Papers</i>
WWM	Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments