

ity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them.”

Swaim, however, makes the reasonable point that John Gibson Lockhart seeks to resolve the barely respectable position of the writer in this period by conceptualizing him as a new blend of selfless amateurism and dignified professionalism. In effect, he contends, Lockhart holds up Sir Walter Scott, who was both a working lawyer and a part-time novelist, as the very model of what a modern author should be.

Certainly the newly self-referential magazines of the early 19th century raise questions about who writes, and how, and when they find the opportunity to do so. Many journalists were also lawyers, clerks, or clergymen; several were women. As articles were typically pseudonymous, the magazine was a masked ball in which peasants and princesses might (theoretically) mingle on equal terms. This is one of the ways in which periodicals of this time prepare the ground for the greater democratic participation that followed the extension of the franchise in Britain in 1832 and 1867.

Swaim's final chapter discusses Thomas Carlyle and argues for the influence of the Presbyterian sermon in Carlyle's writing and, more generally, in generating the assertive periodical culture of early 19th-century Scotland. This is not a difficult case to make: Carlyle is a pulpit orator who loses his faith in Christianity without ever losing his faith in jeremiad. History becomes the “real prophetic manuscript” from which he interprets “Signs of the Times” that include the fatal mechanization of modern life.

Ironically, of course, it was that very mechanization that enabled Carlyle and other periodical writers to reach a wide audience and, Swaim argues, to conceive of a new “public sphere” in which individuals of different ranks, independent of church or crown, could debate public issues through rational argument.

Scottish Men of Letters is clearly based on a doctoral thesis, and the casual reader may be deflected by the detail of the bones Swaim picks, which can distract from the larger skeleton he

excavates. That skeleton—the vast body of Scottish journalism during 1800-1830—has lain too long neglected, however, and Barton Swaim's thoughtful analysis draws welcome attention to its power and influence.

In the last 20 years we have experienced our own communications revolution: Texts and emails, Facebook and Twitter, have created a world in which to type is to talk. Everyone speaks to everyone else in print. This has produced a new global intimacy, but also new masks and bluffs, as Joe Public realizes his potential to write as Joe Pesci or Joe Conrad.

It has also opened new pathways for participative democracy. It is good to be reminded that early 19th-century Britain experienced a similar phenomenon: The growth of print journalism created a new national conversation in which unprecedented numbers of people could participate, but also a contest over authority and style and debate about how a newly expanded audience might relate to the newly expanded media.

If our era produces commentators of the caliber of Jeffrey, Wilson, Lockhart, and Carlyle, we will have no cause for concern. ♦

BCA

Boys 'n' the Hood

Manhood, that is, and why it's elusive.

BY CHRISTOPHER BENSON

The Dionysiac crowd on the Mall last winter was probably not prepared to hear their new president exhort the “young nation” to “set aside childish things.”

This inaugural message troubled my ears for two reasons: the clumsy invocation of apostolic authority—St. Paul was the one who said “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things”—and the presumptive maturity of a young leader instructing his countrymen to grow up when his political grooming was limited to 20 years of catechesis under the pastorate of a black supremacist, two look-at-me! memoirs penned before the age of 50, and a rock star keynote address at the Democratic National Convention.

If Barack Obama does not strike you as a paragon of maturity, neither are his

predecessors George W. Bush, whose “Bring it on!” challenge to Islamic militants conjures the scene of a playground standoff, and Bill Clinton, whose sexual escapades become more intelligible with the admission, “I was born at 16 and I'll always feel I'm 16.” So are we a childish nation? Or to ask the question that vexes

women in nightclubs and church singles groups alike, “Where have all the men gone?”

Gary Cross, a historian at Penn State and brooding sexagenarian, explores an answer to this question in

Men to Boys, which is part history, part psychoanalysis, and part confession. Limiting his survey to “the experience of the white middle-class American male,” he traces how

Three generations of men have challenged the genteel ideal of manhood. Over time, they have abandoned traditional markers of male maturity and embraced perpetual adolescence, and, because commercial culture reinforces both trends, today the youngest

Men to Boys
*The Making of
Modern Immaturity*
by Gary Cross
Columbia, 328 pp., \$29.50

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generation has little experience with or taste for alternatives (genteel or otherwise).

The subject here—the “boy-man”—will not likely be the reader because Narcissus only wants to behold a flattering reflection in the pool, and what Cross casts back is disfiguring. Cultural historians will appreciate the copiously researched, subtly argued, and lucidly written account of modern immaturity, but for this thirtysomething reviewer, there was a feeling of mortification, insofar as all the cheerless statistics and salient observations about arrested development induce shame over residual boyishness. Mortification, as medieval ascetics would say, can be its own form of maturation. Thus, *Men to Boys* serves as a needed hair shirt for the regressive adult.

A note on method. Cross emphatically tells the reader that he is not making an essentialist argument about maturity. For those who are not privy to the esoteric debates of the academy, essentialism—according to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*—draws “an objective distinction between an object’s essential and accidental properties, which is not simply a reflection of how we choose to describe the object. An essential property of an object is one that it possesses in every possible world in which it exists.” Social constructionism, the opposite viewpoint, contends that an object has no essential properties. What qualifies as “maturity” for a 21st-century American hipster would not qualify for a 19th-century English gentleman.

Because a transhistorical definition of male maturity would be impossible to formulate, we can better understand why Cross advances a modest cultural argument: There has been a conspicuous delay and decline in the model of manhood that prevailed after World War II, specifically permanent employment, marriage, childbearing, respect for elders, civic engagement, regular church attendance, refined taste, and formal protocol.

Rejecting Victorian patriarchy, “the culture of the boy-men today is less a life stage than a lifestyle, less a transi-

tion from childhood to adulthood than a choice to live like a teen ‘forever.’” The method of his study would be more forceful if augmented with ethical and theological arguments, because our concern should not end with the way man is but proceed to the way he *ought* to be.

Drawing on popular culture and sociological literature, Cross chronicles the infantilizing of men in the Greatest Generation, Baby Boom Generation, and Generation X. To change the terminology, I will refer to them as Warriors, Rebels, and Slackers. Warriors were heirs to the industrial household of divided labor, where women stayed at home, serving in the role of nurturer,



Wally and the Beaver, 1957

and men vacated the home for the office or factory, serving in the role of provider. Prior to industrialization, men worked at the home-based farm or store, acting as *both* nurturer and provider.

The result of divided labor was the economic hegemony of men and the domestic hegemony of women—aloof fathers and doting mothers. Jettisoned from the home, the warrior lived a life characterized by “career-ladder climbing, hard-working self-control, and dark-suit-wearing sobriety.” The solitary cowboys of Westerns captured the imagination of postwar men because the narratives resonated with their own: “A man’s world was a world largely without

women and families.” TV sitcoms in the 1950s and ’60s—*Father Knows Best*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave It To Beaver*—reflected confusing messages about fatherhood, upholding a progressive emphasis on “the father as pal and a paycheck,” a man sensitive enough to bond with his son through leisure activities, ranging from model railroads to Little League, and sacrificial enough to labor tirelessly for his family’s piece of the American Dream, as depicted in the black-and-white simplicity of *Pleasantville*.

Not surprising, there was “a silent revolt from providership” with Beats, playboys, and hot rodders. For every comic Ward Cleaver there was a tragic Willy Loman. For every dignified Billy Graham there was a depraved Hugh Hefner. Cross speculates that some warriors chafed against “genteel respectability and responsibility” because of “Momism,” the fear that maternal dominance enfeebles the boy to surmount his oedipal struggle; hypermasculinity, the combined bravado and misogyny that is driven by an embarrassing identification with the mother; alienation, the philosophy of Holden Caulfield that objects to the phoniness of bourgeois society; and hedonism, the quest for “salvation in heightened experience.”

Rebels marched to Bob Dylan’s anthem about the times a-changin’. Defiance was manifest in flag burning, leftist politics, draft dodging, antiwar protests, tie-dyed clothing, acid trips, hip-swiveling music, gender bending, and free love. The enemies were Brooks Brothers men, boring heterosexuals, and suburban whites. The heroes were braless women, flashy homosexuals, and militant blacks. At bottom, there was a radical mistrust in “the ‘system,’ not just corporate America but the government bureaucracy, the military, the university, and other institutions that seemed to be linked in a seamless web of controls that undermined democracy and personal freedom.”

Rebels were inspired by the Nietzschean injunction of self-creation. Like Europeans who tried to create the “noble savage,” they tried to create a New Man who would challenge what

an Old Testament scholar calls “the dominant metanarrative of technological, military consumerism,” a man who would be *au naturel* rather than ornamented, pacifist rather than aggressive, socialist rather than capitalist, egalitarian rather than authoritarian, emotional rather than rational. The pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty argues that “all any ironist can measure success against is the past—not by living up to it, but by redescribing it in his terms, thereby becoming able to say, ‘Thus I willed it.’” Using this criterion for success, the rebels succeeded by redescribing adulthood as a perpetuation of adolescence.

But Cross does not share Rorty’s optimism, as he discloses in this raw confession:

Far from developing a new, improved form of male maturity, we were tempted by the possibilities of retreating into a world of playful and ultimately child-like myth. The political side of our rebellion died in negative posturing and divisive identity politics. The cultural side succumbed to a quest for the cool in rebellion from the repressive father culture and from the conformity of the “masses.” Instead of creating a less consumerist society, we fueled a more dynamic and individualistic one. In doing so, we cut ourselves off from social and political relevance. We prepared the soil for the thrill-seeking culture of our sons even as we created the contradiction of the Bobo, the “mature” bourgeois male at work combined with the bohemian boy-man in play.

While the rebels did not produce a New Man, they did produce new ironies: the conformity of nonconformity, the hippie-cum-yuppie, and the commodification of youth through waxed bodies, colored hair, bleached teeth, cosmetic surgery, and enhanced virility. What began as a joke on their fathers warped into a joke on them.

If rebels rejected the past, slackers have ignored the past. To speak like a postmodernist, slackers are typified by their “rebellion without rebellion.” For how can boys rebel against their fathers when their fathers were rebels *par excellence*, bequeathing to them a legacy of illegitimacy, divorce, abortion, and relativism? Even if you spin the sixties record positively, slackers yawn

when they learn about how their fathers became “more civic, more tolerant, and less materialistic.” The Burger King motto—“Have it your way”—leads nowhere except to what Cross aptly describes as “bemused cynicism and emotional intensity.” Just consider the humor of leading boy-men Mike Myers and Jim Carrey; the fear of marital and familial responsibilities in *Seinfeld*; the elevation of peer culture in *Friends*; “the testosterone-drenched ads” of the Super Bowl; the voyeurism of reality TV; the faux news of *The Colbert Report*; the sexism of hip-hop and rap; the pornographic violence of video games such as *Grand Theft Auto* or *Doom*.

Cross offers two explanations for this inventory of retarded maturity. First, “the thrill culture compensates for ‘losses’ in masculine power and meaning caused by economic and social change,” including the stagnation of real wages, increase of dual-job marriages, erasure of gender differences, and few opportunities for the heroism of warriors and the activism of rebels. Second, consumer culture is “emotioneering” boy-men to remain “stuck somewhere around the ‘small rodent’ phase of animal evolution,” unable to forgo the adrenaline rush for “cultivated and complex pleasures,” unable to sustain relationships with women and family.

Why? Profitability. Maturity is not a moneymaker, so marketers have a vested interest in extending the expiration date of youth, inventing terms like “tween,” “middle youth,” and “adultescents.” Lacking the external guideposts of the past and the internal qualities of manliness (“sure-footedness, inner strength, confidence of purpose”), slackers shrink into their private funhouses.

Men to Boys concludes with competing notions about modern manhood. Alternatives to the boy-man are, first, “the benevolent patriarch, restrained and made caring and responsible by religious faith, which shames men into abandoning their wild impulses for the pleasures and duties of bourgeois providership as the head of the household”; second, “the semisecular but myth-inspired longing of men to recover a lost sense of a caring and sacrificing masculinity”; and third,

“the nurturing and emotionally expressive role of the androgynous New Man, who abandons his old patriarchal privileges and embraces equality in private and public roles.” Cross claims the first two solutions “remain ineffectual and often reinforce some of the most authoritarian and least rational aspects of earlier patriarchal ideals” while the third solution amounts to “the stereotypical wimp.”

The secular bias of the author motivates him to dismiss the practicability of the traditional Judeo-Christian argument for male headship, so the reader is left with an unsatisfying conclusion. Cross tells us we need to forget the idealization of male maturity in the 1950s, celebrate generational differences through conversation and reflection, rethink the thrill culture by engaging in simpler activities like the “slow food” movement, and recognize our familial and social responsibilities.

Two assumptions weaken this conclusion. First, Cross assumes “the root of male immaturity is ultimately not personal but cultural,” a liberal reflex that victimizes the individual. Second, he assumes male maturity must be “shorn of traditionalism, asceticism, and authoritarianism,” another liberal reflex that newer is better. Notice the “isms” are an effort to denigrate custom, self-discipline, and control of any kind.

Cross reminds me of Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, a father who anxiously observes “the wild giddiness of his youngest daughters” but is “contented with laughing at them” instead of restraining them, either because he is a softy or because he wants to avoid being perceived as patriarchal. Elizabeth, his older and wiser daughter, pleads for her father to *be* a father: “If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment. Her character will be fixed.”

For boys to reach manhood, they need parents to check their “exuberant spirits,” education to refine their vulgarities, and religion to direct their paths. Otherwise they will be “beyond the reach of amendment.” ♦