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The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution

CLAIRE LANGHAMER

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013

xxii + 290 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-959443-6 (hbk) (£20.00)

The scholarship on intimate life and personal relationships in twentieth-century Britain was, for a long time, dominated by sex. Historians and sociologists examined changes to fertility rates, levels of sexual knowledge, the legislation governing sexual behaviour, and, most of all, the question of whether or not there was a ‘sexual revolution’ in the 1960s or 1970s. With the growing interest in the history of emotions, however, attention is increasingly turning to love and romance. Claire Langhamer’s new book follows in the wake of insightful work on the subject by Marcus Collins, Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, and provides a very welcome and distinctive contribution to this expanding literature. Langhamer deals with the central problem facing all scholars of love – how to find sources that illuminate this often very private emotion – by drawing extensively on the Mass-Observation archive, which contains a treasure trove of reports, diaries and personal reflections on all aspects of life in mid-century Britain. As the author is careful to point out, this material does not somehow provide unmediated access to the ‘typical’ experiences of ‘ordinary’ people, but when it is used as sensitively as it is here, it offers a very rich seam of evidence. The Mass-Observation collections are richest in the 1940s and 1950s, and these decades lie at the ‘interpretative heart’ (p. 9) of the book, although the author’s argument ranges more broadly, encompassing the period from 1920 to 1970, and drawing on a range of other sources, including social surveys, newspapers and magazine articles, problem columns, and television documentaries.

Langhamer’s central contention is that the understanding of romantic love changed significantly in the middle decades of the twentieth century. A new language of intimacy emerged which downplayed pragmatism and material concerns, and instead placed greater emphasis on emotional connection and authenticity. Marriage now offered far more than

simple companionship: love was able to transform the self, and couples were increasingly seen to be embarking on a shared journey to achieve togetherness and emotional growth. Love was also more insistently intertwined with sex. A satisfying and pleasurable sexual relationship was deemed not just vital for marital stability, but a sign of a genuine emotional connection. These ideas underpinned what has often been regarded as the 'golden age' of marriage, with more people than ever before tying the knot, and doing so at earlier ages. In 1970, only 8 percent of women aged 45-49 had never been married, and the following year the mean age of marriage fell to the long-term lows of 24 for men and 22 for women (pp 4-5). Yet, as the author makes clear, the heightened expectations placed on love and marriage meant that this 'golden age' was based on shaky foundations. Love, after all, could fade or disappear as time passed or circumstances changed. When marriage did not bring the personal fulfilment that had been promised, the sense of disappointment was all the greater, and traditional notions of duty, respectability and self-sacrifice were often no longer powerful enough to hold relationships together. With the demand for individual self-realisation increasingly trumping appeals to the social good, the argument that divorce should be based on the 'irretrievable breakdown' of a relationship rather than a system of matrimonial offences became unanswerable. After the end of Langhamer's period in 1970, the marriage rate fell while the divorce rate rose: the 'golden age' came to an abrupt end.

Whether or not this quite amounts to the 'emotional revolution' of the book's subtitle, Langhamer demonstrates these changes to marriage and intimacy fluently and persuasively. Three self-reinforcing sections examine in turn everyday understandings of love, patterns of behaviour, and the formalization of relationships. Finding explanations for these shifts is no easy matter, and the author points, as others have done, to the impact of affluence, secularisation, and the popularisation of psychological ideas. Because the focus is predominantly on the 1940s and 1950s, the Second World War also looms large. Langhamer

shows that the pressures and enforced separations of wartime created a specific emotional climate, although the longer-term influence of this intense period is less clear. This is a book that embraces nuance and complexity, though, and Langhamer is always alive to variations in attitudes and behaviour between classes and different social groups.

The English in Love is aimed at the general reader as well a scholarly audience, and, accordingly, is engagingly written and full of rich human detail. There is very limited historiographical discussion, but otherwise it has all the substance of an academic monograph. Social and cultural historians of mid-century Britain will find plenty to explore, both in the individual stories and the wider analysis. This volume, especially when read alongside the recent work of Szreter and Fisher, provides us with a deep and detailed understanding of the intimate lives of English men and women of the war and immediate post-war generation; what we need now is more research on love, rather than sex, in the 'permissive' 1960s and 1970s.

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