



This is a repository copy of *Men and masculinities in modern Britain: A history for the present* edited by Matt Houlbrook, Katie Jones and Ben Mechen, 2024, Manchester, Manchester University Press, viii+323 pp., £25.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-5261-7469-7.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/216055/>

Version: Accepted Version

Book review:

Ellis, H. orcid.org/0000-0001-8571-0340 (2024) Review of: *Men and masculinities in modern Britain: A history for the present* edited by Matt Houlbrook, Katie Jones and Ben Mechen, 2024, Manchester, Manchester University Press, viii+323 pp., £25.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-5261-7469-7. *Women's History Review*. ISSN 0961-2025

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2024.2389487>

© 2024 The Authors. Except as otherwise noted, this author-accepted version of a journal article published in *Women's History Review* is made available via the University of Sheffield Research Publications and Copyright Policy under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Men and masculinities in modern Britain: A history for the present, edited by Matt Houlbrook, Katie Jones and Ben Mechen, 2024, Manchester, Manchester University Press, viii + 323pp., £25.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-5261-7469-7

Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain is an excellent volume of essays. Without exception, individual essays are engaging, well researched and insightful. They do a good job of showcasing the range and diversity of current history of masculinity scholarship and the continuing vibrancy of the field. I also applaud the structure of the volume and the decision to embed a much higher level of reflexivity than is normally the case with collections of essays. The short reflections ending each thematic cluster of essays and the discursive conclusion really help the reader to understand the aims, motivations, and context of the project from which the book has emerged. The reflections on the gendered nature of knowledge production (and the consequences for female historians in particular) within history as a discipline are very welcome.

Yet *Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain* sets itself a more ambitious goal, namely to ‘set a new agenda in the history of masculinity,’ (p. 3) one that brings the field back to a critical engagement with and contribution to contemporary activist struggles for gender, race and wider social equality. The editors argue that ‘revisiting the historical conjuncture when *Manful Assertions* [edited by John Tosh and Michael Roper] was published...is a productive way of exploring what the field has become’ (p. 5). Their aim is not to offer a comprehensive survey of work published over the past thirty years, but rather to ‘map key historiographical trajectories and suggest future directions’ (p. 5).

While the editors offer a thought-provoking discussion on the beginnings of the field in the 1980s and the essays included here demonstrate the excellent work being carried out now, the varied and important research published in the intervening years receives less careful treatment. At times, there seem to be some quite sweeping statements made, for example, when the question is asked ‘if historians...have not done enough to reconnect our histories with the political contexts or activist groups for whom they might be important. What might historians of masculinity do to recapture the progressive energy that characterised *Manful Assertions*?’ (p. 308). It is not clear whether certain trends within the field are being referred to here or *all* research published in recent decades. Footnotes in the Introduction list many examples of individual studies published in the history of masculinity, but this work does not feel like a proper part of the discussion.

This may relate to the view expressed by the editors in the Introduction that work in the history of masculinity has been characterised by a focus on ‘particular themes’ (p. 8). It is their contention that these ‘discrete interventions’ have somehow caused the field to become ‘bogged down’ (p. 8). They also highlight the ‘recurrence of intensely structural debates about the intersection between dominant, subordinate, and hegemonic masculinities’ which ‘constrains’ and ‘overdetermines’ the field (p. 9). These structural concepts are however central to the arguments put forward in several of the excellent individual chapters in the volume. I would be wary of steering future research in the history of masculinity away from these concepts. If we are to demonstrate effectively the reasons behind the endurance of the existing gender order, then it is precisely these concepts which help to explain the complex and relational impact of patriarchy.

There seems to be a similar inclination to criticise work that does not align squarely with contemporary political agendas. Such an overtly ‘present-centred’ approach can unduly limit research that is carried out within the history of masculinity and can also lead to work (including a volume of essays like this) feeling quickly dated. When the research agenda outlined is rooted so firmly in particular historical moments (for example, the end of the Trump presidency, Covid-19 and Brexit), it can no longer claim the currency it did when the book was first conceptualised and written. For example, John Tosh’s confident pronouncement that the ‘prospect of military service’ in Britain ‘has retreated to near vanishing point’(p. 182) has been completely upended by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

I welcome the editors’ enthusiasm for ‘reclaiming feminist history as an endeavour’ (p. 309) and note that a feminist politics motivates many contributors to this volume. Considering individual chapters, however, this seems mostly to manifest itself in an exploration of how marginalised groups of men have been affected by the state and by dominant forms of masculinity. This mirrors a tendency identified by Hannah Charnock within oral history to seek to ‘recover’ excluded or hidden voices. While extremely valuable, this approach can be accompanied by a lack of critical attention paid to the workings of gendered power at the centre. Understanding how beliefs about masculinity shape elite power structures is crucial to comprehending the perpetuation of the unfair and unequal gender order, whose endurance the editors rightly lament. Yet the volume does not seem to engage with this question, which is surprising given Paul Deslandes’ involvement in the **initial** project. More could have been made of his excellent work on elite masculinities.

What the editors put forward as an alternative, an antidote to what they feel is lacking in the field, namely a focus on masculinity as process, as something unfinished, contingent, always in flux, is important but not novel. Individual studies and edited volumes have been making this point for many years. Similarly, the completely valid criticism of ‘crisis’ as a framing for understanding historical masculinities is not new.

Men and Masculinities in Modern Britain makes significant contributions by highlighting the ongoing need to connect historical research with contemporary activism and feminist politics. However, its overtly present-centred approach, its lack of attention to important ongoing theoretical debates, and to elite masculinities, limit its historiographical depth. The volume’s strengths lie in its reflections and case studies, which provide valuable insights, but it ultimately falls short of offering the comprehensive and systematic overview of the field which it claims is needed.

Heather Ellis

University of Sheffield

h.l.ellis@sheffield.ac.uk