
The Reconstruction of Masculinities from the Victorian and Edwardian Period into Interwar Britain

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Abstract:

The following article will argue that masculinities in the interwar period became far more flexible than those of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Fatherhood and domesticity played an important role in the reshaping of masculinity as well as religion, intersectionality and hobbies. A letter to the *Times* highlights how lawn tennis was deemed acceptable to play amongst young men. In addition to newspaper articles, this article will use Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935) to interpret the new, more flexible masculine norm such as the main character's caring attitude towards women. Some aspects of the Edwardian and Victorian masculinity remained in the interwar period, for example, physical fitness and being a breadwinner, however much had changed. An example of this is the use of cosmetics due to the emerging 'cosmetic industry'.

The interwar period in Britain (1918-1939) represented a pivotal point in the construction of gender identities after the fracturing and reshaping of masculinities during the First World War (WWI). Martin Francis argues that after WWI masculinities became more domesticated and family centred as the idea of what a man should be moved away from the public sphere and towards fatherhood and the private sphere.¹ He argues that fathers were present in the home in the Victorian period yet they would only spend time with their older children.² This article will explore the ways in which domesticity in the interwar period made for both a new flexible masculinity, in which men could be 'the domesticated male' and a return to what could be described as rigid Victorian and Edwardian masculinities, in which they simply resumed their breadwinner role.

The use of cosmetics, the aftermath of the war and the role of religion will also be explored in the ways in which a new masculinity was formed. The use of primary materials such as letters to the *Times* and the film, *The 39 Steps* (1935, Alfred Hitchcock) will provide contemporary opinion and will be used alongside secondary materials and theory. Raewyn Connell has argued that hegemonic masculinity is defined in relation to femininity, it is a system that places a certain type of man above others, normally based upon race, class and, particularly, sexuality.³ The work of Francis and Matt Houlbrook argues that masculinity is defined by historic context. This suggests therefore, that due to the historic

¹ Martin Francis, 'The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity', *The Historical Journal*, 45:3 (2002), p.637-638.

² *Ibid.*, pp.639-640.

³ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p.68.

poignancy of the interwar period, hegemonic masculinity would change, thus changing gender relations, suggesting flexibility within interwar masculinity.

The use of cosmetics by men in the interwar period has been studied by Houlbrook, who highlights that men who were caught in possession of cosmetics could be ‘proved’ guilty of sexual deviance or transgression and this evidence was certainly used in cases of importuning. Possession of a powder puff or rouge would be used as proof of intent to imitate a woman and therefore this person was assumed to have homosexual desires.⁴ Of course the assumption of sexual orientation and sequential persecution appears to be rigid, however men in possession of cosmetics would suggest an element of flexibility to masculinities, the rise of such use Houlbrook attributes to the ‘emergence of the “cosmetic industry”’ after WWI.⁵ Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity is interesting in this context as it would suggest that the subversion of gender performances was used as a sign of sexual orientation for contemporary law enforcers.⁶ Indeed a solicitor in 1936 saw these men as:

‘a type of moral pervert who seemed to delight in imitating persons of the opposite sex, not only in dress and speech but in regard to the use of powder and the carrying of such things as powder puffs and rouge.’⁷

There is significance in the desire to subvert these performances as men who did not conform to socially acceptable forms of masculinity saw an outlet in the form of cosmetics. These men were not trying to be women, they were merely rejecting gender norms. These cases are an example of non-normative masculinity and they are also victims of hegemonic masculinity.

Despite cosmetics still being considered effeminate by interwar standards, there appears to be some change as to what was deemed to be acceptable in regards to masculinity. Whilst standards of masculinity seem absurd by modern standards, an item as unassuming as mittens, for example, are described in a *Times* article as being acceptable. The ‘selfishness and gloating’ that the cold brings is no longer deemed necessary to masculinity, stating that ‘the fact is that it is by no means disagreeable to be warm oneself and see others with blue fingers.’⁸ It was not only by maintaining warmth that men could now enjoy mittens without fear of losing status, but also through sporting practice such as lawn tennis, which was deemed an ‘effeminate game’ by a self-described ‘Old Etonian’ who wrote to the *Times* in

⁴ Matt Houlbrook, ‘The Man with the Powder Puff in Interwar London’, *The Historical Journal*, 50:1 (2007), p.148.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.170.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), p.173.

⁷ Houlbrook, ‘The Man with the Powder Puff’, p.149.

⁸ ‘Mittens’, *Times*, 7 January 1920, Section 15, p.15.

1920. This did not stop younger men from pursuing ‘the trophies and the tea parties of this effeminate game.’⁹ When questioned, the reported response from younger men was ‘You are the most dreadful snob we ever met. We intend to do exactly as we like.’¹⁰ This suggests a generational divide between what was considered acceptable for a man to pursue and what was not, this very difference suggests a new masculine ideal and one that was more flexible. The use of the word ‘effeminate’ is especially relevant to Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity as it suggests that the writer deems lawn tennis as not acceptable based on its relation to femininity. This highlights a conflict in the ideal masculinity.

With lawn tennis deemed acceptable by interwar standards of masculinity, it is no surprise then that there was a movement towards the re-modelling of masculinity in regards to an increased domesticity. As previously mentioned, Victorian fathers had a presence in the house but this new domesticated male was ‘not merely of normative masculinity, but of interwar national identity.’¹¹ The recreation of a national identity was deemed a crucial factor in recovery after WWI. Indeed, Francis states that ‘the late Victorian “flight from domesticity” had become impaled on the barbed wire of the Somme’.¹² This suggests that the traditional ideal of masculinity was abandoned after WWI as it had been used as a tool to recruit men to the frontlines and was blamed for the loss of such men. *The 39 Steps* is an example of how patriotic masculinity adapted during the interwar period from frontline action to covert espionage.¹³ The hero, Richard Hannay, is reluctantly enlisted to prevent a top military secret from leaving the country, that is not to say that his mission is without violence, guns are used as a threat towards Hannay. *The 39 Steps* is an example of how historical context can define masculinity as Hannay himself uses cunning wit and persuasion to escape the violence, rather than retaliating. Contrastingly, Francis argues that during the interwar years the opposite is true in film and literature; violence and physical strength were the weapons of choice of the hero.¹⁴

The role of the domesticated man and especially of the father was particularly important to the Canteen Association; a wining and dining club open only to middle class Catholic men. There was an emphasis on being a loving husband and father, and both contributed to the ideal Catholic

⁹ ‘Mittens’, *Times*, 7 January 1920, Section 15, p.15.

¹⁰ Old Etonian, ‘The Manners of Young Men.’, *Times*, 3 August 1921, Section 6, p.9.

¹¹ Francis, ‘The Domestication of the Male?’, p.641.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *The 39 Steps* [film] directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1935).

¹⁴ Francis, ‘The Domestication of the Male?’, p.644.

masculinity.¹⁵ This is evident in the words of Thomas Locan, a founding member who advised his members:

‘In your domestic relationships we look to find you, if husband, affectionate and trustful; if father, regardful of the moral and material well-being of your children and dependants; if son, dutiful and exemplary; as a friend, steadfast and true. These qualities will dignify our Association and extent its benign influence.’¹⁶

A present father figure was typified as integral to the masculinity prescribed by the Canteonian Association in order to raise Catholic children. Indeed, the Association set up ‘The Children’s Fund’ as a way to fund the school fees and scholarships of children of the Canteonian’s as well as enabling the funding and expansion of Catholic secondary schools.¹⁷ The role of the family and of domesticity were key in providing the religious guidance of these children by including a domestic element of masculinity the Canteonian Association represented a more flexible style of masculinity compared to the Victorian ideal of the ‘flight from domesticity’.¹⁸

The newly domesticated male as described by Francis is shown to be a natural progression away from the ‘unrestrained and visceral masculinity in public life.’¹⁹ Francis attributes this to the changing nature of politics and how it was conducted away from the rowdy hustings and towards the use of radio.²⁰ This reflects the public sphere of politics invading the private sphere, therefore becoming accessible to the domesticated man which would suggest a flexible masculinity. From the 1880s, the Conservative Party had been rebranding itself as the party of the family, which was further enforced in 1918 due to the addition of the partial female electorate.²¹ The addition of female voters and the use of radio enabled politics to enter the private sphere which redefined politics and masculinity within the political sphere. This is an example of masculinity defined by historical context.

The new domesticated man perhaps was not all that different from Victorian ideas of hegemonic masculinity and it should be seen as perhaps a way of maintaining patriarchy. As John Tosh argues, the

¹⁵ Alana Harris, ‘The People of God Dressed for Dinner and Dining? English Catholic Masculinity, Religious Sociability and the Canteonian Association’, in *Men, Masculinities and Religious Change in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. by L. Delap and S. Morgan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.55.

¹⁶ Alana Harris, ‘The People of God Dressed for Dinner and Dining? English Catholic Masculinity, Religious Sociability and the Canteonian Association’, in *Men, Masculinities and Religious Change in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. by L. Delap and S. Morgan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.55-60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.72.

¹⁸ Francis, ‘The Domestication of the Male?’, p.640.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.642.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

institution of marriage is maintained through hegemonic masculinity and used to enforce patriarchy.²² Connell states that domestic abuse is a serious issue within patriarchy and that male perpetrators can often feel justified in their violence.²³ This is highlighted in *The 39 Steps* in which the deeply religious older husband and his young wife live in rural Scotland, the wife is from Glasgow and dreams of returning to the city, however, her husband disparages her ambition. He uses his religion as a means to keep her secluded and isolated on the farm, asserting that ‘God made the country’.²⁴ We see him hit his wife as she reveals that she helped Hannay escape. Hannay even suspected that this may happen if she helped him suggesting that this was normal behaviour of a husband, even a pious one. His words and his actions are contradictory as during grace he asks ‘and continually turn out heads from wickedness and worldly things’. His masculinity is represented by his religion and rural environment, which is in stark contrast to Hannay’s more urban and caring masculinity.

The new idea of male domesticity was not necessarily so widespread as the idea of the male breadwinner was still used as the framework for unemployment relief.²⁵ After WWI preference was given to ex-servicemen, however, ex-servicemen with families were of a higher priority.²⁶ This highlights how preference of relief, or deservedness, was granted through the framework of the male breadwinner. There was even the case of one single ex-serviceman who allowed another ex-serviceman with a family to take his job offer. Indeed ‘Home life, marriage and children were the very things that veterans had been told they fought for in the First World War.’²⁷ This was an attempt to return to what was considered ‘normal’ prior to the war and ‘to distance British society from the public and private traumas of the war’.²⁸ This was certainly an attempt to return to the Victorian masculinity. Indeed, Marjorie Levine-Clark argues how the entire British welfare state ‘defined the full male citizen as a heterosexual married man with dependants.’²⁹ This is clearly a rigid pre-war hegemonic masculinity.

As in the Victorian period, there was still an emphasis on the restriction of alcohol connected with interwar masculinity. Despite being a wining and dining club, members of the Canteen Association had a restriction of two drinks per meeting which was later reduced to one.³⁰ There was a general

²² John Tosh, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender’ in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, ed. S. Dudink, K. Hagemann and J. Tosh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) p.46.

²³ Connell, ‘Masculinities’, p.83; Sylvia Walby, ‘Theorising Patriarchy’, *Sociology*, 23:3 (1989), p.214.

²⁴ *The 39 Steps* (1935, Alfred Hitchcock).

²⁵ Marjorie Levine-Clark, ‘The Politics of Preference: Masculinity, Marital Status and Unemployment Relief in Post-First World War Britain’, *Cultural and Social History*, 7:2 (2010), p.233.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.233.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.234.

²⁸ Marjorie Levine-Clark, ‘The Politics of Preference’, *Cultural and Social History*, 7:2 (2010), p.235.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.235.

³⁰ Harris, ‘The People of God Dressed for Dinner and Dining?’, p.61.

movement towards a healthier lifestyle altogether. The fit male body was vital to the empire and a link was made 'between manliness, physical fitness and patriotism in interwar Britain.'³¹ WWI highlighted a need to raise the standards of the soldiers and this patriotism was interpreted to the extreme as the 'cult of imperial manliness, sportsmanship and athleticism of the late Victorian and Edwardian era was appropriated by the British Union of Fascists.'³² As Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues, this 'celebration of imperial manliness' highlights the continuation of gender expectations from the Victorian era through to the mid-twentieth century.³³ This is an example of the continuing rigidity of standards of masculinity. Yet, there would seem to be some flexibility within these standards as due to the trends within physical fitness, working and middle class men could maintain standards as gymnastics and weightlifting did not require large amounts of space.³⁴ This meant that the activities were affordable and accessible.³⁵ These standards of masculinity are clearly defined by trends within the context.

The role of physical fitness in masculinity was not just patriotic, it was also spiritual. The concept of 'muscular Christianity' was also important to men's status, the activities of the Cantenian Association expanded to include sporting activities such as cricket and golf matches. The Association also saw an interest in the scientific 'management of the body.'³⁶ The discourse surrounding 'muscular Christianity' emphasised the education of character, this had its origins in the military during the late Victorian period but had been adopted by the Quaker community. Despite being pacifists, they sought the involvement of 'muscular Christianity' through the British Scouts.³⁷ This suggests that the concept of 'muscular Christianity' was so important to British masculinity during the interwar period that the Quaker community even participated in it despite their oath of pacifism. This suggests a harsh rigidity to masculinity and a return to Victorian and Edwardian hegemonic masculinity.

There was undoubtedly a class element involved with masculinities, such as the elitism of the Cantenian Association. Due to the affordability of make-up in this period, working class men in the interwar period could participate in the use of cosmetics.³⁸ This is significant, as Connell argues that

³¹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Building a British Superman: Physical Culture in Interwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41:4 (2006), p.596.

³² Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Building a British Superman: Physical Culture in Interwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41:4 (2006), p.697.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.597.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.598.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.598.

³⁶ Harris, 'The People of God Dressed for Dinner and Dining?', p.61.

³⁷ Mark Freeman, 'Muscular Quakerism? The Society of Friends and Youth Organisations in Britain, c.1900-1950', *The English Historical Review*, v125:514 (2010), p.651.

³⁸ Harris, 'The People of God Dressed for Dinner and Dining?', p.55; Houlbrook, 'The Man with the Powder Puff', p.148.

masculinities intersect and interact with each other, based upon class and race.³⁹ Arguably, the legal persecutors were, at the very least, middle class. During the trial of ‘William K’ the court heard that when searched, ‘face powder, scented handkerchiefs, and two photographs of himself in woman’s costume were found’, William K. was a hotel porter and therefore a member of the working class.⁴⁰ Thus, the trials are an example of the middle classes imposing their ideal masculinity upon the working classes and persecuting those who do not fit their model of masculinity. This is the hegemonic masculinity theorised by Connell and is an example of rigidity within interwar expectation of the man.

Masculinity of the interwar period certainly moved away from and was more flexible than Victorian and Edwardian masculinities as characterised by domesticity with the importance of family and a redefinition of what was acceptable. The findings from the *Times* articles are of particular interest to the field of masculinity, these letters are from individual members of the public and, therefore, do not necessarily represent the views of the general public at large. Yet, they still represent a useful insight into what was deemed acceptable for men. These letters demand the further study of opinions and interpretations in interwar masculinity and of masculinity by historians. The use of films for the study of masculinity is also important. Film reviews could be of interest to scholars as these give material on the reception of the film, which may provide some interesting insights for the study of masculinities. The study of masculinities in the interwar period is important for understanding British national identity. In such a disparate context, masculinity as a tool for analysis enables us to understand notions of gender norms and how gender was constructed.

³⁹ Connell, ‘Masculinities’, p.75.

⁴⁰ Houlbrook, ‘The Man with the Powder Puff’, p.149; *Ibid.*, p.149.

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