

Social History in Perspective

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SOCIETY AND CULTURAL
FORMS IN NINETEENTH
CENTURY ENGLAND

SIMON DENTITH





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For Kath, as ever

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In *Beyond a Boundary*, his immensely attractive and persuasive history of cricket in nineteenth-century England and the twentieth-century West Indies, the great Marxist historian C. L. R. James protests against the exclusion of W. G. Grace from all accounts of the social history of England. In his generous conception of such a history, a cricketer like W. G. Grace – not that there *was* anybody like him – could only be understood as bringing forward into the late nineteenth century some of the social energies of an earlier age. And for James, this is not only a matter of social history; as he remarks of the stroke-play of another, this time West Indian, cricketer, if this was not culture, then what was?

I regret to say that, despite C. L. R. James, this is the last time that the robust figure of W. G. Grace makes an appearance in these pages. He appears now to suggest something of the possible range of the book that follows. What might *not* be included in a book that sought to give an account of society and cultural forms in nineteenth-century England? The range of material that ought to be considered is so wide, the volume of ‘evidence’ so enormous, as to make any attempted overview like this one appear foolhardy. How could one set about writing a book which seeks to make sense of the cultural history of the nineteenth century in England in the context of its encompassing social history, when the range of what can be legitimately counted as ‘culture’ is . . . practically everything?

Though at times the book may read like a survey, it has certainly not been my intention to write one. On the contrary, what I have hoped to provide is rather a *way* of understanding the cultural material I discuss – to understand it as a way of negotiating the complex and changing social relationships of the nineteenth century. But to establish such a view of cultural objects requires in effect close and extended readings of

them, compounding the difficulties created by the range of the material. In practice, this has meant that I have had to be very selective in the examples that I have discussed in any detail. It has also meant that I have tried to consider mostly familiar material, in the hope that in doing so I will be providing common reference-points for readers as the book proceeds. I certainly have not restricted my discussions to the 'canon', because part of my argument is that canonical material is drawn from cultural forms that represent only a proportion of the possible forms with which people in the nineteenth century made sense of their lives. However, in making that case I have alluded, wherever possible, to cultural objects that I have presumed to be relatively well known.

A further point follows from this, concerning the system of annotation and reference that I have adopted. Quotations and references are annotated in the usual way at the end of the book, though I have tried to keep annotation of this kind to a minimum. In addition, however, I have also provided a brief reading-list for the book as a whole, taken chapter by chapter, suggesting a small number of books that might be immediately turned to in order to pursue any of the points or arguments advanced. This seems to me to be more useful than an unwieldy bibliography, which like the very nineteenth-century material discussed, could have in principle (or in practice) no conclusion. I hope that readers of this volume will find this a helpful arrangement.

A prefatory word is also required about the restriction implied in my title, 'Society and Cultural Forms in Nineteenth-Century *England*'. The final chapter of the book discusses the embarrassment that attaches to the words 'Britain' and 'England' – how it is impossible to use the first without invoking a particular national and imperial history, while to use the second to include Scotland, Wales and Ireland is unforgivable. The cultural material that I discuss is, for the most part, English; since one of the central contentions of the book is that cultural objects emerge from specific social situations, it seemed best simply to signal in the title the real limits that actually control the book. The difficulties that surround this terminology are in fact intractable, because they emerge from still unresolved, and conflictual, national histories. These are not difficulties that can be overcome by a decision about terms, but the restriction implied in the title is to be understood as alluding to this awkward history, without, I hope, reproducing the awkwardness.

Finally, a brief outline is required of the matter of the book. The first, introductory, chapter suggests the more theoretical, or relatively

abstract, considerations that underlie the book as a whole. One such is the idea of 'faultlines' – major structuring oppositions within the social order around which, or across which, cultural objects are constructed. The chapters that form the bulk of the book are concerned with a series of such faultlines. The second and third chapters discuss one principal axis of division in nineteenth-century England, the lines of authority that play across the divisions of social class. Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned with the faultline that runs between country and city, discussing in turn the cultural forms that are addressed to rural and urban life. Chapter 6 is concerned with the question of gender, and the centrality of the faultline of gender to nineteenth-century cultural production. Finally, Chapter 7 addresses the social and cultural divisions that formed around ethnicity and race in the nineteenth century. While these are real distinctions, I am conscious even as I list them of the artificiality of treating them separately – I shall be arguing, indeed, that these faultlines in social and cultural life both support and contradict each other in specific ways. Nevertheless, the necessity for such abstracting simplifications is evident if one is to make any effort at cultural description at all.

In this particular effort at cultural description, my warmest thanks are due to John Belchem and Peter Widdowson, who both generously agreed to read the manuscript, and managed to correct some at least of my errors. My thanks are due also to my colleagues in the Humanities Department at Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, with whom I have enjoyed many a disagreement on the matters discussed in the book; and especially to Philip Martin, for creating an environment in which the book could be written. Finally, I wish to thank Kath and Imogen and Jack, who have helped me write the book in all sorts of ways which would be too numerous to mention.