

Christopher E. Forth's new book is arguably the most important work to be written on the history of masculinity this decade. The title gives an indication of both Forth's ambitious task and his approach. The more monolithic 'Masculinity' is preferred to the currently fashionable 'masculinities'; 'the Modern' is a key problematic, as well as an impressively long time period; and the prominence of 'the Body' in the title reflects the ethos of the book, where the corporeal looms large. This is cultural history, but not of fluid and multiple phenomena such as representations or identities, or of the usual small-scale case studies and 'moments'. Some key figures in the history of masculinity have recently wondered whether the field has been too quick to embrace the cultural turn, and whether it was losing sight of social history's ability to deal with power structures and long-term change. Whether intending to or not, Forth makes the best possible riposte to this argument by demonstrating that it is possible for a (cultural) historian of masculinity to make a significant statement on a big canvas.

Firstly, the book's geographical sweep is impressive. Rather than reducing Western masculinities to the American, British and French experience – as is often the case – we learn a lot about Russia and Australia, as well as many European nations. Although Forth is sensitive to local conditions and traditions, we are largely presented with a picture of simultaneity: the German *mannlich* took on connotations of seriousness, wisdom and gravity in the 1780s, in common with its English counterpart 'manly' (42). Secondly, Forth adopts an ambitious chronology, from 1500 to the present. Too often, historians of masculinity fail to look beyond their period silos – for example, historians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries approach masculinity in different ways, so it is difficult to trace themes across the periods – but Forth's extended approach allows him to make the case for broad continuities and commonalities, in contrast to the usual stories of ruptures or crises. Events such as the French Revolution or World War I are instead part of bigger stories, and the notion that masculinity is in crisis is nonsensical given that its history has never been 'non-critical' (3). Historical exceptions also emerge from Forth's study as anything but: fascist masculinities are merely 'a particularly noxious version of a general cultural dream of male rebirth predicated on a strategic rejection of modernity's most softening tendencies' (199). No doubt period specialists will quibble with the details of this homogenizing picture. For example, Forth places a lot of emphasis on the role of military ideals of masculinity in the national projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but, certainly in Britain, the soldier remained a rather problematic figure. Soldiers were routinely criticized for their effeminate attachment to fine uniforms, vanity and mannered formality; the culture of politeness arguably survived longer in the military than it did in civil society, so militarism has not always been the 'hard' counterpoint to 'soft' civilization that Forth sometimes supposes.

The tension inherent in modernity is at the heart of Forth's narrative. Civilization both supports and undermines the case for male dominance, and the history of the male body in particular is fraught with contradiction: when men become 'modern', they become distant from the conditions of struggle and discomfort that constitute authentically 'masculine' practices and habits (4–5). Masculinity in the Modern West is therefore a work of synthesis, but is much more than just a textbook. As well as offering a comprehensive review of two decades of work on the history of masculinity (the endnotes constitute a 40-page introduction to the best of this literature), Forth offers an argument that has the potential to give this most diverse of fields some unifying coherence. He also refuses to understate the size of its practitioners' political task. Rather than complacently accepting that masculinity is 'cultural' and therefore fluid and amenable to change, he emphasizes that things have in fact changed little in half a millennium. Historians of masculinity therefore still have much work to do, and Forth's book should be their rallying cry. I cannot recommend it strongly enough.