

Age Relations and Cultural Change in Eighteenth-Century England

Book Review by Tim Reinke-Williams

In this study of intergenerational relations in north-east England Barbara Crosbie charts the progress of a generation from their births during the 1740s through to the end of the 1770s when the cohort came of age. The book is divided into three sections focusing on childhood, youth, and adulthood, and Crosbie considers age alongside gender, class, and place as categories of historical analysis, drawing on evidence from newspapers, political tracts, civic records, letters, memoirs, and the diary of a former apprentice to recover the experiences and mentalities of a generation, which lived through an era of cultural, demographic, economic and political upheaval.

In Chapter One Crosbie focusses on child-rearing practices, noting the increasing availability of literature intended both to entertain and educate children; the emergence of gendered clothing for children; and the marketing of consumer goods such as dolls and jigsaws for children. Those born in the 1740s were raised to be polite people capable of participating in civil society, but when raising their own children from the 1770s onwards, the cohort rejected what they regarded as the artificiality of such child-rearing practices, focusing instead on maintaining the innocence of their offspring by recognising and responding to what they saw as innate individual sensibilities. As Crosbie demonstrates in Chapter Two, this emphasis on inculcating politeness coincided with an expansion of consumer choice in education, with the 1750s and 1760s being a golden age for grammar schools when printed instructional manuals proliferated, many authored by women and men from north-east England, which were used to educate boys and girls in vernacular and classical grammar.

Chapter Three tracks the cohort into adolescence, focusing on changes to the experiences of apprentices and the operation of the apprenticeship system. In the decades after 1750 fewer apprentices lived with masters and those who entered apprenticeships were increasingly likely to be from the lower ranks of society. As the guilds declined, master-apprentice relations were reconfigured to resemble those between employers and employees, while the ability of domestic patriarchs to discipline youths was undermined by the increasing reach of the judicial system, and as it became more common for middle-ranking adolescents to remain resident with their parents, intergenerational dynamics within household-family units altered. To investigate these issues, in Chapter Four Crosbie turns to the diary of Ralph Jackson, which provides details of his relationships with his parents and sister, of his life as an apprentice, and of how he spent his leisure time. Ralph was prompted to keep the journal by his father but increasingly used it to reflect on his religious beliefs, and Crosbie argues that this shift in focus signified a growing self-assertiveness which reflected the fact that Jackson belonged to a generation less constrained by patriarchal authority than their predecessors.

The autonomy of Ralph and his contemporaries was manifested through their consumer choices, and in Chapter Five Crosbie focuses on how what people ate, and how they styled their hair created divisions between age groups. During the 1760s and 1770s authors of cook-books aimed their works at a mass audience and although cook-books were not a new genre in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, the texts produced in this period included recipes which promoted the use of produce from within Britain and its colonial possessions rather than idealising French cuisine as earlier works had done. These culinary trends coincided with shifts in how hair was styled, with natural looks becoming fashionable, even if wigs, powder and the skills of professional hairdressers often had to be employed to achieve the desired appearance. Divisions between generations were evident in the political arena too, and as Crosbie demonstrates in Chapter Six age was used for propaganda purposes in

the election of 1774 when those voting for the first-time in Newcastle, especially younger siblings and those resident outside the town, tended to back reform-minded candidates.

Overall, this is an important book in which Crosbie offers a persuasive account of how the education and training of a generation shaped their consumer choices and political affiliations when they came of age. The book also draws attention to three areas where further research is needed. Firstly, Crosbie is at pains to discuss women, especially when analysing educational treatises and cook-books, but her focus elsewhere on apprenticeship and voting patterns inevitably means that the coverage of men and masculinity is stronger than that of female experiences and identities, more information about which needs to be recovered. Secondly, while readers will learn much about social, cultural, and political history of the north-east, additional case studies are needed to determine whether similar generational shifts occurred elsewhere in the British world. Finally, by focusing on the period 1740–70 Crosbie critiques the notion of a 'long eighteenth century', a chronological framework initially developed by political historians, which has (perhaps) less utility for social and cultural historians, and which may be replaced by a focus on shorter timeframes by new generations of scholars.