

BOOK REVIEW

Laura Harrison. *Dangerous Amusements: Leisure, the Young Working Class and Urban Space in Britain, c. 1870–1939*

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As someone who grew up in York in the 1970s and early 1980s, I witnessed changing manifestations of youth culture in the city through glam, heavy metal, punk, and especially disco. I was delighted, therefore, to receive a review copy of this meticulously researched monograph—arising from the author’s Leeds University PhD—focusing on a case study of York; a city that, among historians, has been largely neglected until now; although Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree produced the earliest social histories with *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (1901) and *Poverty and Progress: A Social Study of York* (1941), albeit with a primary focus on social conditions rather than social and cultural change.

Laura Harrison, a young academic, builds on the pioneering studies of working-class youth cultures and working-class communities undertaken during the 1980s by the likes of Andrew Davies (on Salford), Steven Fielding (Irish Catholics—and strangely neglected here, especially considering York’s very sizeable Catholic population historically), Claire Langhamer, Melanie Tebbutt, and the present reviewer, to present a rich account of the urban landscape as experienced by the “young working class” of York between c. 1870 and c. 1939. This is such a major undertaking and it must be said that the author’s focus—on how young people “negotiated” (p. 6) the urban spaces of the city—is somewhat narrow. There are only five chapters and two of these (chapters 2 and 4) rehearse very well-trodden ground of rational recreationists’ (ch. 2 *passim*) (largely hostile) reactions to youthful behavior on the streets. But the book comes alive in chapter 3, where we are treated to a micro study of a York slum, Walmgate and Hungate, the detail of which is very reminiscent of Jerry White’s unrelenting and arcane monograph, *The Worst Street in North London: Campbell Bunk Islington Between the Wars* (1986); and in chapter 5, which surveys the street ritual of the “monkey parade,” (ch. 5 *passim*) and its supposed survival across the period from 1870 down to the 1930s, if we are to believe the newspaper reports cited from Birmingham, Sheffield, and Dundee! Rowntree, of course, claimed that the monkey parade had “almost ceased”¹ by the date of his second social survey of York, undertaken in 1936 (not 1941, as the author erroneously claims, 192). An historical debate was generated on this puzzle back in the late 1980s and it remained unresolved. It is disappointing that Harrison has not pursued it further; though she cites no evidence countering Rowntree’s assertion about York.

This is very much a class-driven study and terms like “the young working-class” are far too crude for a meticulous social historian to be using repeatedly without any careful

¹ B.S. Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York* (London, 1941), 470.

elaboration. Reading this book, it is almost as if the transgressive youth behavior described and the poorest occupants of the slum properties in Walmgate (predominantly Irish migrant communities) were the urban community of York. A closer reading of Rowntree would have revealed to the author that “primary” poverty (of the sort described in chapter 3) had been largely eradicated from the city by the 1930s; and “secondary” poverty was caused not by lack of means but, for example, insufficient pooled contributions from supplementary wage-earners in working-class families as well as expenditure on alcohol and so on. There is, in fact, little sense in this book of the very real improvements to living conditions in York created by new housing estates like Acomb, Tang Hall, and New Earswick by the late 1930s. What revolutionized the lives of the provincial working-class, especially in York, is that these new council estates comprised independent dwellings each with a garden. The author is correct that space needs to be factored into historical accounts of working-class history, but private space is as significant by the 1930s as the public space of the city centers.

Finally, this reviewer found the almost total exclusion of commercial aspects of urban youth culture over the period a major deficiency. Surely, if the youthful street life of Coney Street, York, was still noticeable to so-called middle-class observers by the 1920s and 1930s, this does not necessarily equate to the survival of the monkey parade. As the author acknowledges, there were cinemas, and indeed numerous shops, along Coney Street by the interwar years and parading may have been adapted to incorporate queuing outside cinemas or cafes, and simply mingling rather than the survival of a pre-1914 courting ritual. And there is no reference here to York’s semi-rural location. From most parts of York, then as now, an intrepid cyclist could reach open countryside in less than ten minutes. York was not an urban sprawl like Greater Manchester. Youths of the interwar years fished, visited public libraries in the city and in the suburbs, and joined Lads’ and Girls’ Clubs. Formal education after 1870 embedded institutions in the lives of the young; even after they began their working lives at fourteen or fifteen.