

# Leisure, Entertainment and Popular Culture

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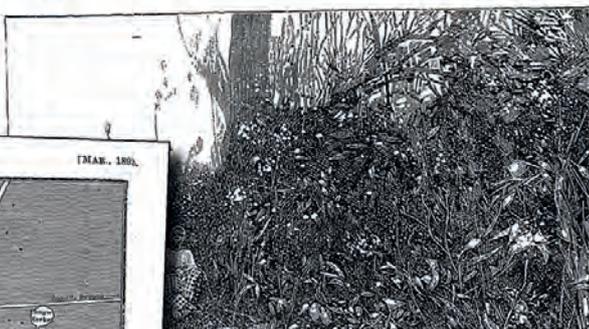
The Bible Society Cleanings.  
Various source media, 19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals



A CYCLING TOUR IN SOUTH AFRICA.  
BY THOMAS WOODVILLE HARKER.

ii. HE vrou is indeed the helpmate of her husband in every way, would be useless. I do believe the American poet at some time or other must have had visions in his dreams of this portion of the globe, for has he not written:—

Baptisms at San Salvador. [FEBRUARY, 1899.



JANUARY 1, 1890.] THE MISSIONARY HERALD.  
CALABAR COLLEGE, KINGSTON, JAMAICA.  
THE following graphic letter from S. B. Burton, Esq. F.R.G.S., of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, will be read with great interest:—  
"Newcastle-on-Tyne, December, 1894.  
"DEAR MR. BAYNES,—The request  
Royal Mail s.s. *Eden* on July 18<sup>th</sup> last.  
"On the twelfth day out we passed

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\* Indicates a title in the collection

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Just as they revolutionized work and industrial production, so too did the Victorians transform leisure, play and consumption. What did the older leisure landscape look like, how did such major changes come about, and how did they affect social life and experience?

### Early Nineteenth Century

In the early years of the century, there was a multitude of customary pastimes associated with work and calling, seasonal festivities and "holidays", mostly public, ritualized, often boisterous. Cruelty to animals and other brutalities were common features of traditional sports. Commercial entertainments of varying sophistication flourished in the theatre, circus, pleasure garden and fairground. With its wide range of services and prime social lubricant, the tavern or pub was the institutional hub of popular pleasure and traditional sociability, home to a dense aggregation of fraternal clubs and trade societies. *Cleave's London Satirist* \* was a typical product of this highly literate, irreverent and politically radical sub culture, a constituent of what E.P. Thompson called 'perhaps the most distinguished popular culture England has known', a claim worth revisiting.<sup>1</sup> From another perspective, Pierce Egan was the enthusiastic chronicler of a set of fashionable pleasure seekers dedicated to the theatre, the prize fight, and the drinking dens and brothels of metropolitan low life. Though tastes could clearly differ, much of this older leisure world was shared by all classes, "from lord to lout".

### A New Leisure World

Religious revivalism and political reaction contributed to an increasing division between polite and popular culture and the growing censure of disorderly or cruel forms of play. In the 1830s and 1840s, a crushing new work discipline, longer hours, population growth and rapid urbanization almost extinguished leisure for industrial workers, severing it from its traditional moorings in work, custom and community. Yet popular culture proved remarkably resilient, generating new forms, sites and occasions that cohered into a recognizably modern leisure world from the mid-century on. Leisure was now a separate compartment in life—'a sort of neutral ground which we may fairly call our own'<sup>2</sup>—yet increasingly subject to competing economic and social interests. It was more intensely commercialized by a leisure industry capitalizing on new technologies. Reformers campaigned more intrusively against abuses. The state, locally and nationally, intervened to police and regulate leisure. It featured frequently in the press and periodical literature, its compelling yet unsettling new role in contemporary life already taking shape as "the problem of leisure" in what was to be a long-running critical discourse.

### Profit and Morality

The pub was at the forefront of new commercial development, transformed into the brightly lit, lavishly furnished "gin palace". Its unaccustomed opulence and more efficient service were designed to increase patronage and profit from a more numerous urban crowd. Publicans were the earliest of modern leisure entrepreneurs, repackaging other staples of popular

recreation as profitable commodities. The traditional amateur sing song in the back room of the pub was rehoused in the purpose-built premises of the music hall. The prototype modern entertainment industry, the music hall was a yet larger and more spectacular palace of the people, charging admission for nightly professional entertainment.

Such garishly seductive resorts intensified the opposition of reformers to the alleged degeneration of morality and social order in the new towns. Mostly middle class and evangelical, reform lobbies campaigned against animal sports, riotous fairs, pleasure-taking on the Sabbath and, most aggressively, against drink and intemperance. With only limited success from suppression (given patchy support from magistrates and the newly created police force) reformers promoted wholesome counter attractions such as coffee music halls and pubs with no beer in a strategy of "rational recreation". In a more successful experiment, Thomas Cook, temperance reformer, later travel magnate, ran his first railway excursion in 1841, removing working-class children from the corruptions of Leicester races. Shrinking travel time and costs, the new railway had a massive impact on leisure. Seaside resorts were a favourite destination, their numbers expanding more rapidly than any other group of towns of the period. A large proportion of the six million visitors to the Great Exhibition in London's Crystal Palace in 1851 came by train, many from industrial districts, their orderly conduct impressing observers fearful of the mob. This, the most spectacular of palaces for the people, offered an ideal mix of recreation and instruction with soft drinks provided by

Messrs Schweppes, a future giant of mass catering. Rational recreation could be good business.

### Respectability and the New Athleticism

While stressing moral probity and the primacy of work, the mid-Victorian middle classes incorporated leisure more fully into their lives, suitably respectabilised. The home and its private pleasures were the ideal site, with reading a favourite, its materials more cheaply produced by the steam press, more widely distributed by the railway. The station bookshops of W.H. Smith, a further example of commercial enterprise, encouraged reading during the "enforced" leisure of the train journey. There were moderately priced pianos for ladies of the house, and musical evenings (with cheap sheet music) for the family. Christmas, a sentimental and marketing triumph, was an instant new Victorian tradition, while cheap domestic service encouraged a vogue for dinner parties. In the growing family press, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*\* was the first to cater to the middle class woman, a successful mix of the dutiful and the recreational. Appropriately moral entertainment for the middle class boy made its print debut in *Boy's Own Magazine*\* with its regular attention to sports and pastimes, a formula profitably extended to lower middle and working class youngsters in *Every Boy's Magazine*\* and *Boys of England*.\*

Gardens were a further leisure amenity for an expanding middle class. Here family and guests could play lawn tennis (an invention of the 1870s) or croquet, respectable mixed sports received with particular enthusiasm by women. Croquet offered 'fresh air and flirtation in agreeable combination' while

approximating the resources and cachet of the aristocratic country house. In 1874 the *Saturday Review* deplored 'the eager attempts of persons to wedge themselves into a higher stratum by seizing on the favourite amusements of that higher level'. The frisson of romantic opportunity and the pursuit of status enlivened the new bourgeois appetite for leisure.

There was spectacular growth and innovation in sport. Middle class males led the way with the reformed athleticism pioneered in public schools. The foundation of the Football Association in 1863—Assoc., hence "soccer"—exemplified the new model: codified, disciplined, regulated by nationally agreed rules and, compared to the free-for-all of its folk predecessor, tidily contained within modern parameters of time and space. The new sports boasted healthy credentials, refreshing mind and body for work, fostering "muscular Christianity", team spirit and national preparedness. Some enthusiasts believed the new sports could repair the bridge between the classes, but the early governing bodies were the preserve of gentlemen amateurs who barred mechanics and artisans for fear of social contamination. Working men formed their own clubs, appropriating football as the people's game. Professionalized and invested with intense tribal loyalties, plebeian football conferred membership and identity among an otherwise anonymous urban crowd.

### On the Town: Modernity and the Metropolis

In 1872, the *Graphic*, a new illustrated paper, declared 'We are now living in the Music Hall and Refreshment Bar epoch; an epoch of much gilding and abundant looking glass'.<sup>3</sup> The recent introduction of limited

liability had released a rush of venture capital into palatial new venues. Music halls were nationwide and numerous, London alone boasting thirty-three in 1866 with an average capacity of 1,500. Circuses, playing to a pan-class audience and more respectable than the music halls, were also big business. Civic pride added handsome new public buildings to provincial city centres—art galleries, museums, libraries and concert halls. Together with entertainment and cultural uplift, these new social spaces provided a stage for the rehearsal of collective and individual identities in the fluid and impersonal world of the modern city. The official city was the stage for ritual displays of authority by a middle class elite; the leisure city offered the populace a stage for the refinement of a fashionable alter ego and the chance of adventure. *Tinsley's Magazine* in 1869 attacked the halls and their stars for encouraging aspirant petit bourgeois 'gents' in a 'sham gentility', dressing and behaving above their station. Great mirrors along the walls—the 'abundant looking glass'—signalled a new attention to the presentation of self. One of a clutch of similar publications, Birmingham's *Dart* \* instructed other aspiring sophisticates on how to manage appearance and read the shifting social codes of the big city and its leisure world.

### Disreputable Pleasures

Editorialising on 'Modern Amusements' in 1876, *The Times* noted 'a mingled mass of perfectly legitimate pleasures ever thrusting themselves forward'. For all a greater acceptance, leisure remained unsettling. Churchmen bemoaned the addiction to commercial entertainments, countering with their own mix of recreation and religion. The Pleasant Sunday Afternoon

movement, originating in West Bromwich in 1875, was meant to be an antidote to the local taste for cock-fighting, a reminder of the persistence of unreconstructed pleasures that cared little for the law or moral obloquy. Horse racing, another example, was now more regulated, but still raffish. Derby Day remained something of a saturnalian occasion, 'an outlet for a year's repression' reported a French visitor, and gambling was the lifeblood of the track.<sup>4</sup> Off-course betting was made illegal in 1853 but still thrived among the urban working-class for whom the outwitting of this particular law was a recreation in itself. Newspapers included sporting supplements; specialist publications such as *The Sporting Gazette*\*, *The Sportsman*\* and *Baily's Magazine*\* proliferated. The latter was typical in its primary attention to horse racing though increasingly obliged to acknowledge new developments in the sporting world.

As historic patrons of the Turf and other traditional sports, the aristocracy stood for an ideal of cross-class fraternity in play, yet by the late nineteenth century this ancient practice of lordly sociability was giving way to a more indulgent pursuit of personal pleasure. In company with a new plutocracy, history's original leisure class became Veblen's conspicuous consumers, lapsed models of the classical good life. Despite all the new institutions of improvement, true culture seemed under severe threat on many fronts. It was bourgeois "enjoyments" that moved Matthew Arnold to ask in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1866: 'Can any life be imagined more hideous, more dismal, more unenviable?'<sup>5</sup> Other anxieties were built in to the new leisure world. The railway imposed new imperatives of time and

punctuality. 'There is', lamented the *Saturday Review*, 'a sort of mechanical style in our joys'.

### Fun for All: Leisure and Mass Culture

At the end of the century Britain, no less than France, enjoyed its own belle Époque, whose joie de vivre countered if it did not eliminate the social and critical angst of the fin de siècle. A still burgeoning field of cultural production, leisure was at the same time more stabilised and assured. Capitalism conceded its workers more frequent and regular breathing space, with standardized instalments at the end of the day, the end of the week and the end of the year, when an annual summer holiday clinched the new trade-off between work and leisure, a settlement sweetened by gains in real wages. As social investigator Charles Booth recorded, 'How shall we be amused?' was a leading question among the poor, no less than other classes.<sup>6</sup> In the *Fortnightly Review* in 1894, Grant Allen proclaimed 'The New Hedonism', an avant garde inversion of conventional morality: 'Be virtuous and you will be happy' was rewritten as 'Be happy and you will be virtuous'.

Leisure venues proliferated, most notably in London whose West End was the Mecca for pleasure seekers from all classes, though price differentials meant they took their enjoyments from separate seats. Music hall was in its heyday, while theatre, long an object of middle-class suspicion, also boomed, lead by the strikingly modern Savoy on the Strand, the first with electric light, a feature of the opulent Savoy hotel next door. Joe Lyons opened his chain of teashops with the slogan 'Free Trade in Pleasure'. Department stores

boasted their own refreshment rooms while promoting shopping as a pleasure in itself. Continental restaurants opened in Soho. The fastest-growing occupational groups in the national census were actors and chefs.

Popular culture extolled its pleasures in an endlessly self-referential loop of representation and reportage. At the theatre, musical comedy offered a glamorized model of middlebrow style and fashionability, its romantic adventures set in spectacular reproductions of the city's new consumer sites. Relentlessly topical, music hall introduced new American song and dance styles and flirted with modernist trends in the arts. (The new wonder of film, as yet in its infancy, was initially absorbed into the music hall programme). The good time, its celebrities and necessary accessories were hyped in a blizzard of advertising. The popular press greatly increased its circulation, its mix of sensationalism and moralism exemplified in *Halfpenny Marvel* \* which found new readership among the boarding school-educated young. Other titles provided a running commentary on current attractions, offering readers a collaborative social script on the perils and possibilities of the city and its pleasures, while the stylized realism of popular song exploited a similar scenario.

### Women at Large

This was a newly heterosocial world in which women were a more prominent public presence, in both image and actuality. Glamorized in the chorus line, icons of poster art and picture postcard, women were now increasingly visible as workers in the new bars,

teashops and stores, facilities they enjoyed in their own leisure time. In *Women's Penny Paper* and similar publications\* they also campaigned for temperance and women's rights, claiming as a natural right of citizenship control not only of their labour but of their leisure. In their pursuit of the latter, women of the day were particularly advantaged by the bicycle, the sensational new vehicle of the "naughty nineties". Liberating in its requirement of more "rational" dress, the bicycle also enabled young women to escape their chaperones.

### Still a Problem?

Now more readily accommodated in an orderly modern lifestyle, leisure could still excite controversy. Reformers continued to battle immorality, most famously in their campaign against indecency on stage and prostitution in the promenades at the Empire music hall in London's Leicester Square in 1894, though some commentators now commended the halls for their robust vulgarity and essential Englishness. The temperance movement continued its attack on drink which, despite new alternatives such as ice cream, mineral waters and teashop fare, remained a ubiquitous feature of popular pleasure, conspicuously so in music hall and pub. For others, popular culture had become mass culture, generating a new pathology. Thus the Liberal politician, Charles Masterman, described with deep political unease 'the new civilization of the Crowd' at Saturday football matches: 'that congestion of grey, small people with their facile excitements, their little white faces inflamed by artificial interest'. 'The longing for pleasure and excitement,' he added, 'are common to all classes'.<sup>7</sup> Socialists worried that the capitalist leisure

machine diverted the working class from political action, a judgment shared by some historians for whom the music hall in particular turned workers into Tories, jingoes and imperialists, its hegemonic regime of modest pleasures a consolation for political impotence.<sup>8</sup> Leisure can have a lot to answer for.

### New Questions for Leisure

Capitalism, class politics and the conflict of cultural values are important in the history of leisure and its transformation. But other concepts of cultural formation, experience and meaning can help interpret the rich evidence of contemporary print media—sexual politics, the paradoxes of modernity, the invention of tradition, the displacement of the sacred, leisure as performance and its true place in the emotional economy of the modern subject.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) (New York: Vintage Books, 1966) 831.

<sup>2</sup> From a collection of sermons, J.E. Kempe (ed.), *The Use and Abuse of the World*, 3 vols (London, 1873-5) 1:39-74.

<sup>3</sup> Gustave Dore and Blanchard Jerrold, *London, a Pilgrimage* (London, 1872).

<sup>4</sup> Hippolyte Taine, *Notes on England* (1872) (New York: H. Holt, 1876) 44.

<sup>5</sup> "My Countrymen," *Cornhill Magazine*, 1866, 13:153-72.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London, 1903*, cited in James Walvin, *Leisure and Society 1830-1950* (London: Longmans, 1978) 63.

<sup>7</sup> C.F.G. Masterman (ed.), *The Heart of the Empire* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1902) 7-8; *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen, 1909) 162.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 235-38.

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