

STEVEN MINTZ — *A Prison of Expectations: The Family in Victorian Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 1983. Pp. 234.

This is a fairly conventional study of Victorian family life as illustrated by five “best-selling” novelists — Catharine Sedgwick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Eliot, Samuel Butler and Robert Louis Stevenson. It is clearly written and uses such familiar concepts as inter-generational conflict, sibling bonds, and the public versus private dimension, to identify some ways in which the psychodynamics of Victorian family life responded to larger social changes. Mintz gives particular attention to the religious influences, which he sees in a rather more positive light than is often the case. Generally speaking, however, those who are familiar with the current literature in Victorian studies will find little to detain them in this book, and may spend their time more profitably reading something more original, such as Peter Gay’s verbose but stimulating *The Bourgeois Experience*.

Despite its conventionality of method this book frequently proclaims its novelty and dwells a good deal on methodological matters, though usually at a rather general level. Mintz does not label his work as either psycho-history or cultural history, but enrolls himself under the general banner of “the new” social history (when was it ever otherwise?). This is perfectly defensible, since social historians agree at least in not wishing to fetter themselves with definitions. But what he says or does is perhaps less interesting than what he does not say or do; these take us into some wider methodological problems which deserve consideration.

Mintz is properly aware of the reader’s obvious question: why *this* particular quintet — two English, two American, one Scottish — of Victorian novelists? The national mixture is justified by the existence of a trans-Atlantic community which is effectively invoked. But why *novelists*? Here Mintz reasonably argues that popular writers are particularly influential in shaping culture. Yet on this argument, surely it is primarily their literary works that are influential, and their own lives are of interest chiefly to the extent that they assist us in understanding those writings. Presumably the grounds for including the girlhood of Catharine Sedgwick as a specimen of “Victorian” family life — she was born in 1789 — is that her pre-Victorian experience shaped her novels, which in turn influenced Victorian readers. But Mintz doggedly refuses to consider the problem of influence, or indeed to give any serious consideration to his subjects’ novels. To take one obvious example, a discussion of George Eliot’s views on marriage which pays no attention to *Middlemarch*, or fails to remark on the striking reverse image of the Dorothea-Causabon marriage in the Eliot-Cross marriage, is deficient to say the least.

It seems worth speculating on the reasons for Mintz’s refusal since he is not alone in his hands-off attitude to literature, like a member of the plumbers’ union refusing to hammer a nail. Historians — so the implicit argument runs — deal with factual evidence, such as letters. Hence Mintz willingly subjects his subjects’ correspondence to a close, and sometimes over-imaginative reading. But novels? they are fiction and thus, off-limits, as if some impermeable epistemological barrier separated these two very literary forms of evidence.

Vulgar considerations of intellectual economy support the convenience of a rough distinction between fact and fiction, and the force of disciplinary centripetality helps to explain the remarkable consensus by which literary scholars and historians “respect” (i.e., ignore) each others’ fields, each literary discipline incorporating the other’s mythology to strengthen its own identity and methodological distinctions. Thus — to resume the implicit argument — true literature transcends time and space, and to attempt to tie it to a specific authorial context is to ignore its essential “literariness”. Whatever the author derives from his or her historical environment is so utterly transformed by the artistic imagination as to cease to bear any “useful” relation to reality. Thus it is pointless for the historian to expect to derive anything of historical value from novels. Whether this sort of argument underlies Mintz’s self-denying ordinance is unclear, but too many social historians do seem to follow

it. They are promiscuously interdisciplinary towards the social sciences, but a superstitious reverence for “art”, sedulously fostered by the literary critics, keeps them chaste in their relations with literature.

Another of Mintz’s methodological points, this one more explicit, deserves comment. Uneasily aware of the number-crunchers, he justifies his huddled population of five by invoking the question-begging notion of “case studies”. The comfortingly social scientific sound of this phrase conceals a conceptual void. “Case studies” are often said to “reflect” — another evasive term widely used by social historians, not just by Mintz — some broader reality. The crucial point, the nature of this relationship, is papered over with a metaphor. Mintz is by no means alone with these conceptual problems: they are endemic in current social history, and heightened by the belief of many “new” social historians that research techniques are all, and presentation is non-problematic. Yet these are almost precisely the issues confronted, and in one way at least, resolved, in the classic realist novel — the relationship of the specific to the general, of the individual to society. To his credit, Mintz seems vaguely aware of this; he refers reverently, in passing, to Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. But he does not yet have the combination of tact and deep knowledge of the period necessary to such a resolution; witness for instance his belief (p. 67) that still-life painting was a major Victorian genre. As an example of what a more felicitous touch can bring to this sort of multiple life study, one might cite the recent study on Victorian marriages, *Parallel Lives*, by the literary historian Phyllis Rose.

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WILLIAM H. HUBBARD — *Familiengeschichte, Materialien zur deutschen Familie seit dem Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1983. Pp. 277.

This is a collection of well-presented source materials on the history of the German family. Appearing in a series “Statistical Workbooks on Modern History,” part of Beck’s larger *Elementarbucher* series, Hubbard’s work seems designed to introduce family history at the German proseminar (mid-undergraduate) level. Hubbard sees history changing into a “problem-oriented social science” (p. 11), and *Familiengeschichte* is partly a plea for this kind of history in Germany. Despite his modest aim of supplementing rather than summarizing the literature on family history (p. 14), Hubbard gives an excellent twenty-five page resumé of major works and interpretations in the field, classified by the three approaches which have so far dominated it: demography, “feelings” (Ariès, Shorter, Stone), and economics. There is a good selective bibliography.

The source materials are grouped into “legal framework” (10 percent of the text), statistics (42 percent), and written evidence (30 percent). “Germany” is the 1871-1939 Reich, its earlier component-states, and the Federal Republic. The DDR is not represented, nor is Austria except for some statistics from Hubbard’s own work on Graz. In the statistics, Berlin illustrates metropolitan conditions, Saxony an industrial region, and Bavaria a rural one.

The “legal framework” gives brief excerpts extending from the Prussian *Landrecht* of 1794 to the latest revisions of the Civil Code (BGB), illustrating the change “from patriarchy to partnership” as normative bases for family life. The statistical material is Hubbard’s most original contribution. He had to collect it from a welter of sources, often