


generally. There is still, however, more work to be done. A more meaningful scholarly understanding of Kinnock's tenure and its lessons for center-left policy and electoral strategy is possible only with an unsentimental jettisoning of the many partisan myths that have developed in the intervening thirty years.

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CHRISTOPHER HILLIARD. *A Matter of Obscenity: The Politics of Censorship in Modern England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. 336. \$35.00 (cloth).
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In *A Matter of Obscenity: The Politics of Censorship in Modern England*, Christopher Hilliard shows that debates about obscenity between the middle of the nineteenth century and about 1979 were also debates about citizenship. England's obscenity law had Victorian origins in the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 and then *R v. Hicklin* (1868), which articulated the principle that the law was there to prevent material that might “deprave and corrupt” (18) from falling into the wrong hands (subsequently the basis of most obscenity prosecutions). Hilliard argues that the judgment in *R v. Hicklin*, almost coinciding with the second Reform Act, meant that literacy was conflated with citizenship. The spread of literacy was akin to the spread of democracy—many wondered how both might be used and whether the working man was up to the task. In that reading, obscenity laws were used to demarcate a certain kind of self-governing citizen.


Hilliard explores the history of England's obscenity laws by covering some rather familiar territory that has been quite thoroughly investigated by others—Colin Manchester on English obscenity laws and their Victorian origins; Anthony Cummins and others on the trial of Zola's translator, Henry Vizetelly; the problems of modernists like D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce (extensively dealt with by Alan Travis in 2000 and others before and since); the market in pulp magazines, novels, and the like (again quite well documented); the *Lady Chatterley* trial (surely the most written-about obscenity trial in history, dealt with in numerous accounts and histories of Penguin Books); the *Oz* trial of 1971; and, finally, through the usual suspects in the supposed anti-1960s backlash (Lord Longford, Mary Whitehouse) and the Williams Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship of 1977–1979, whose remit was to consider public morality in all its forms. Hilliard's argument, also not that unfamiliar, is that all these events were dominated by the Victorian idea of policing the literary public in order to cultivate habits of good reading and therefore good citizenship. However, it is important to remember that this idea of a cultural hierarchy of purportedly good and bad reading was never only dictated by the obscenity laws and in fact was something that was defended and promoted by many authors themselves. It was the impulse behind the condemnation of Émile Zola by writers like Arnold Bennet, as Cummins has shown, and the motive of A. P. Herbert in his lobbying in the 1950s for a revised Obscene Publications Act. Hierarchies like this were not only given from the top down but were also reinforced by writers themselves.

There are some odd omissions for a historian who seems to want to present a political history of obscenity. Even though the 1857 Act was distinctly Victorian, England's obscenity laws long pre-dated the nineteenth century and found their origin in the common law offenses of obscene libel and of corrupting public morals. The main aim of those laws was to protect (royal) political authority and religion from satire—both of which were seen as threats to

public peace—and to regulate indecent displays and public nuisances. These ancient functions reemerged at some strange moments—not least in the trials of underground paper *IT* between 1968 and 1971. The eventual judgment against that paper in the House of Lords—that it was in fact corrupting public morals via its columns of gay personal ads, even though the activity advertised was now legal thanks to the Sexual Offences Act of 1967—was also used as justification for a series of raids on gay magazines in the mid-1970s. Similar reasoning was never far from the minds of police in later attempts to raid gay bookshops or confiscate gay magazines (attempts that continued until at least 1986). Equally, the defense of religion resurfaced in the *Satanic Verses* controversy (which Hilliard deals with briefly in the conclusion).

Similarly, Hilliard brushes over rather rapidly one of the key revolutions of the period, the rise of hard-core pornography in the late 1960s, and he discusses it mainly in the context of the Longford Committee of the early 1970s, which was a response to it. This surely is one of the major changes of the time, laying the foundations for the current toleration of sexual imagery online, and it had the kind of political repercussions that Hilliard claims to be exploring. It was brought about by the abolition of censorship in Denmark and Sweden in the mid-1960s and created a thriving though underground market in London from that time on. The complicity of the Metropolitan Police, especially its Flying Squad, in the creation of this market—they were regularly bought off by the porn barons, socialized with them, went on holiday with them, and even seemed to share their outlook—completely undermined confidence in the police as a whole. When Robert Mark was appointed commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in 1972, he famously said that his aim was to catch more criminals than he employed. The result was a series of corruption trials that went up as far as divisional commander. The flood of hard-core material also had a galvanizing effect on the feminist movement of the 1970s.

Questions of obscenity no longer have much of an effect on English politics and cultural life, Hilliard concludes. But this is not because obscenity has gone away, surely. It is because English law no longer relies on blunt instruments like the Obscene Publications Act and its successors—laws that trawled the entire cultural scene without much discrimination and tended to collect a wide variety of things in their nets. The border of acceptability has moved, and the line of policing with it—the law is now directed mostly at very specific things, notably indecent images of children—first outlawed specifically in the Children Act 1978. The first efforts of the police against pedophile groups and their attempts at communication also relied on the ancient common law offense of corrupting public morals, so that law can hardly be said to have been completely surpassed at that date. Again, these developments seem to fall largely outside the remit of the book. However, if you want a thorough survey of the familiar themes and events of English obscenity, then this book is for you.

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