

irrelevant. Some will be irked by Long's reliance on melodramatic language. Phrases like "a curious twist of fate" appear quite often. We learn early on that "the young Victor Buckley would become a pawn in a very dangerous game" (10), and as for his wife, Mary Stirling, "fate was holding a place for her within the footnotes of history" (22). Meanwhile, Long indulges in a lot of guesswork, qualifying many statements with such words as "probably," "apparently," and "it is reasonable to suppose." Such qualifications may express admirable caution, but in excess they undermine reader confidence. More serious, perhaps, are various simplistic and ill-informed interpretations—about the queen's influence over government policy making, for instance, or the pro-Northern stance of Lancashire textile workers, both of which are exaggerated. The book also has some factual errors. For example, the Disraeli ministry of 1868 did *not* have a "slender majority" (170).

When read alongside more scholarly works on British aspects of the American Civil War, this book will be found useful, albeit with the limitations indicated above.

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ANGUS McLAREN. *Playboys and Mayfair Men: Crime, Class, Masculinity, and Fascism in 1930s London*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. Pp. 264. \$24.95 (cloth).
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Angus McLaren's *Playboys and Mayfair Men: Crime, Class, Masculinity, and Fascism in 1930s London* furnishes readers with an intriguing account of the Hyde Park Hotel robbery of 1937, in which four young "gentlemen" conspired to steal Cartier jewelry worth a fortune and bludgeoned Etienne Bellenger, the firm's representative, in the process.

Part one consists of five chapters narrating the circumstances of the robbery, the police investigation that followed, the life trajectories of the suspects from birth to prosecution, the trial, and its aftermath. The last of these charts the perpetrators' efforts to return to society life. Reclaiming wealth and reputation, as well as marriage prospects, after such a public downfall and during the opening salvos of the Second World War proved challenging for the four "Mayfair Men," requiring name changes and appeals to benevolence of aristocratic connections for work, social, and political promotion. At least one of the robbers was unable to escape the shadow of his crimes, embarking on a life of serial thefts followed by ever-lengthier prison sentences. Yet McLaren ably evokes how the privileges enjoyed by the four from their birth continued to elicit (undeserved) sympathy from both penal institutions and those in the robbers' wider social circle, creating opportunities for social mobility that would have been denied to criminals of any other class. This point demonstrates the fundamental grip that class, and the romance of the Mayfair "set," continued to exert on the British cultural imagination in an era regarded as increasingly democratized through the dramatic postwar extensions to the franchise and the election of the first Labour government in 1924. The section also showcases McLaren's detailed biographical research into the social actors involved and their milieus in the fashionable haunts of 1930s London. Providing extensive insight into the way connections were forged among the upper classes, and the kinds of businesses and institutions they patronized (particularly in regard to hotels), the book closely examines the "cultural capital" wielded by the Mayfair Men. Assuring them a status that sent shockwaves through the elite households and schools from which the robbers emerged once they were sentenced, their punishment (which for two of them included fifteen and twenty strokes of the lash, respectively) stoked wide-ranging debates about corporal punishment. Part one thus seeks to immerse the

reader in the dramatic events of robbery and trial as they unfolded, relying on McLaren's storytelling flair to keep one engaged into the chapters that follow in part two, where more traditional academic analyses are foregrounded.

Part two offers a systematic breakdown of how the different dimensions of the Hyde Park Hotel robbery intersect with key themes from the decade, including changing gender relations, class, the moral basis of corporal punishment, and the growing threat from the far right (manifested through the rise of Hitler on the Continent, and through Oswald Moseley's British Union of Fascists). Chapters 7 and 8, on masculinity and crime respectively, do well to synthesize the rich wealth of recent scholarly work on both these subjects in interwar Britain, thereby demonstrating how the attractiveness of robbery to a group of young men born into privilege was generated by the intense focus on "romantic" accounts of criminal enterprise in press, fiction, theater, and film. McLaren clearly identifies the transatlantic circulation of these ideas, contributing to the important historiography on the Americanization of British culture between the wars and attendant concerns about the spread of "gangsterdom" that was the subject of Andrew Davies's work *City of Gangs: Glasgow and the Rise of the British Gangster* (2013). In so doing, *Playboys and Mayfair Men* also functions as a strong successor to McLaren's earlier monograph *Sexual Blackmail* (2002), which similarly looked at the developing perception of sexual taboos across England and the United States in conversation, pinpointing high-profile court cases during the interwar years that brought the legality of certain sexual liaisons into focus.

Although the book makes for an entertaining and insightful read, there is rather a strong disjuncture between the tone of the first and second parts, and a certain element of overlap between the two (for instance, where nuggets of information are mentioned successive times across the chapters, such as the friendship between Hilary Wilmer, a Mayfair Man, and his wife's lover, Patrick Gamble, that resulted in their concocting an alibi together). This appears to be an understandable result of McLaren's struggle to craft a book that will reach beyond the academy by "gripping" the reader with the story of the robbery in the first section. A similar attempt is arguably made more effectively by Christopher Hilliard's *The Littlehampton Libels: A Miscarriage of Justice and a Mystery about Words in 1920s England* (2017), in which Hilliard's original choice of deploying the genre of a murder mystery novel to convey his own analysis of an interwar criminal case study mediated the necessary shift from description to deconstruction. The theme of empire in relation to the "crisis" of upper-class interwar masculinity that McLaren explores in chapters 7, 8, and 9 is also curiously underdeveloped. Despite a number of references to the use of corporal punishment in colonial contexts, popular fears over the presence of African American entertainers in London nightclubs, and the careers in colonial administration that many upper-class men were expected to enter into, the role of empire in the interwar construction of masculinity is never dealt with at length. McLaren's work does provide an excellent overview of the tensions inherent within Oswald Moseley's efforts to acquire political gravitas while exuding a "playboy" persona in chapter 10. Additionally, chapter 6, on corporal punishment, offers a fascinating glimpse into how the debate on its continued use in prisons forced a confrontation with elite experiences of chastisement in public schools and the sexual overtones of these practices. In sum, McLaren offers an engaging work on a lesser-known criminal episode from the interwar period and its legacy, one that speaks to the emergence of the "playboy" as a recognizable category of masculine identity in this era.

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