CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK REVIEW

Ren Pepitone, *Brotherhood of Barristers: A Cultural History of the British Legal Profession, 1840–1940.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. xviii + 216pp. 9 figures. Bibliography. £85.00 hbk.
doi:10.1017/S0963926824000634

Despite immense social change in Britain over the last 200 years, a small set of elite institutions enjoy outsize social and political power, perpetuating elite white masculine cultures despite having become seemingly more demographically diverse. In *Brotherhood of Barristers*, Ren Pepitone offers a new explanation for how and why that has been the case. In their finely grained study of the Inns of Court – the four London institutions that since the mid-nineteenth century have trained and credentialled barristers – they show that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Inns pursued a flexible and adaptable, but ultimately conservative, approach to change. This allowed the Inns to accomodate small numbers of women and people of colour without this challenging the institutions' essential white masculine character.

The book's five chapters fall into two halves that first establish the place of the Inns of Court within the history of Victorian liberalism and the imperial metropolis, and then explore challenges to that social and political order. Pepitone shows that the nineteenth-century Inns engaged selectively and strategically with local government on questions of urban planning and rationalization, while also fighting legal battles that allowed them to preserve their autonomy in the face of major redevelopment projects such as railways. The invented-tradition elements they brought to renovating their buildings and crafting rituals, their commitment to philanthropy and their cultivation of a romanticized homosocial culture all helped to affirm the 'gentlemanly' character of the Bar in the face of the increasing social heterogeneity of its members. Pepitone's detailed examination of planning regulations and of the Inns' relationships with their neighbours allow them to comment more broadly on the political norms of mid- to late Victorian London, where even conservative institutions needed to engage with liberal principles in order to ensure longevity and burnish their middle-class bona fides. Their discussion of the cultural norms of the homosocial world of the Bar is especially sensitive and illuminating when considering the extent to which homosocial intimacies were or were not also homoerotic. They situate romanticized elite homosocial intimacy in an urban landscape that also included the commercial sex trade and other forms of cross-gender interaction. They thus identify unique elements of the Inns of Court (and their physical location in central London, a stone's throw from Fleet Street and Soho), but also productively situate the Inns alongside other Victorian homosocial institutions that historians have identified as constitutive of elite imperial masculinity, such as Oxbridge colleges and gentlemen's clubs.

The book's latter three chapters turn to challenges to the Inns' regime of middle-class masculinity, especially after 1914. Pepitone shows that political radicalism was more challenging to the Inns' cultural norms than other violations of 'gentlemanly' etiquette such as sexual impropriety, and that this same principle extended to how the Inns accommodated small numbers of women and people of colour provided that they did not threaten the overall system. Active opposition to the admission of women and people of colour to the Inns was a minority view, but overseas students from the British empire and women were excluded in other ways: such as through required attendance at ceremonial dinners that did not accommodate different dietary requirements, or claims that women could not be considered for certain career opportunities because it was not possible for offices to provide adequate lavatory facilities.

A metropolitan legal education could have unintended consequences for some overseas students, giving them the tools to forge anti-colonial nationalisms. But others built careers on collaborating with and strategically leveraging the race, class and gender norms of Britain's elite institutions. One of the most intriguing sections of *Brotherhood of Barristers* is a detailed case-study of pioneering Indian lawyer Cornelia Sorabji, who studied at Lincoln's Inn in the 1920s. Sorabji's stated intention to return to India following her studies and to work primarily with and for women clients, her Conservative politics and her strategic leveraging of a feminine 'affect of cuteness' (p. 167) made her seem unthreatening to her white male colleagues. As an Indian woman in the legal profession, she appeared content to remain an exceptional figure. Pepitone develops a comparison of Sorabji with another early woman barrister, Helen Normanton, whose public activism around women's suffrage and gender equality in the legal profession led her to be treated with hostility. This example vividly illustrates the book's broader claim that, well into the twentieth century, 'change-resistant institutions like the Inns' (p. 198) could appear to accommodate greater formal equality and diversity, without making any substantial adjustments to their culture – an insight that is revealing about how and why elite institutions like the Inns of Court continue to have outsize influence in Britain today.

Brotherhood of Barristers is packed with detail, offering a rich and persuasive account of how elite institutions work. It offers a generative basis on which to speculate more broadly about the norms of Britain's political elite, who perpetuates them and to what ends. Is there anything outside these norms? What would it look like to truly overthrow them?

Samuel Rutherford [ID]
University of Glasgow
sam.rutherford@glasgow.ac.uk