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Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America (review)

Brian P. Luskey

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Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America. By Richard Stott. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Pp. 376. Cloth, $55.00.)

Richard Stott's new book traces the social development and cultural persistence of a strain of white masculinity that nineteenth-century Americans sometimes dubbed "jolly fellowship." Stott contends that jolly fellowship took shape in early republic village taverns, where fun-loving and violent men played pranks, gambled, and fought with each other while drinking prodigious quantities of alcohol. Jolly fellows eagerly displayed their courage in brawls to safeguard their reputations. While they could be exceedingly generous to peers, they abused women, immigrants, African Americans, and even animals with impunity. Were they vicious tricksters or romantic chums with hearts of gold? Jolly fellows were an enigmatic bunch whom contemporaries "tolerated" until the 1820s, when evangelical reformers, offering an alternative standard of masculinity that placed a premium on "respectable" self-control, successfully stigmatized jolly fellowship and the consumption of alcohol that fueled it. "Jolly" attitudes and behaviors were unceremoniously driven from the village tavern to the urban underworld, where they thrived among hearty "sporting men"—boxers, political shoulder-hitters, and minstrel performers—who sought fun and frolic not only in urban oyster cellars and dance halls but in the liberating adventures on offer in western gold fields and cattle towns. Enthusiastic male audiences kept up with the most famous sporting men through a variety of cultural representations that valorized rowdy exploits.

Stott, in his attempts to explain the persistence of jolly fellowship, steadfastly refuses to accept the old saw that "boys will be boys" (2). Instead, he implores us to "cease taking such behavior for granted and to scrutinize and analyze it" (54–55). Stott explores the memoirs of sporting men and the writings of their critics to illuminate the ways in which Americans defined, debated, and remembered the parameters of masculine conduct and identity. He argues that, after evangelical campaigns against it, jolly fellowship became a countercultural "resource" that men could use to reject the bourgeois definition of masculinity (213). Fighting, joking, and drinking with peers, sporting men thumbed their

noses at sober "respectability." In theaters and on the pages of sporting publications, "Americans commemorated the values of masculine disorder and violence even as mainstream society embraced restrained male conduct" (186).

Stott has crafted his narrative around an examination of cultural conflict between supporters of two apparently irreconcilable definitions of masculinity. Ultimately, I think that narrative is too tidy. Stott's rich evidence reveals a more complex understanding of white American manhood that contributes to a developing synthesis among scholars such as Patricia Cline Cohen, Amy Greenberg, Helen Horowitz, and Brian Roberts. Despite Stott's emphasis on conflict, his evidence shows that white American men, the most powerful people in their society, did not have to choose between rudeness and refinement. The attitudes and behaviors those standards embodied were indeed cultural resources, but they did not serve as identity categories. White men appealed to various aspects of those markers of masculinity in bids to accrue power among different constituencies as the culture of the market shaped American life as never before. Stott's work suggests that we should tell the story of American masculinity through an analysis of the culture of capitalism. When men found economic independence—and the social status that accompanied it—harder to achieve, some adopted the values of a sporting culture that offered comforting camaraderie among the "b'hoys" and permitted them to wield power over women and racial others. As Stott acknowledges, a burgeoning leisure culture and publishing industry helped well-to-do desk jockeys participate vicariously in sporting culture from the safety of theater boxes or parlors.

Jolly fellows tried to manipulate the leisure market—and the culture of celebrity that it fostered—for their own ends. Boxers such as John Morrissey and entertainment proprietors such as Henry Hill claimed the aura of refinement for themselves and their businesses. While respectability may have been a hollow "racket," as Stott suggests, it also appeared to be a vehicle for obtaining economic success, political power, and cultural authority (273). The fact that neither Morrissey nor Hill was entirely successful in making his representation of respectability credible should not obscure the ways in which these standards of masculinity offered white men opportunities to accumulate power at the expense of others. Evangelical critiques aside, bourgeois types did not necessarily have a beef with jolly fellowship. In fact, sporting life as lived experience and ideological discourse offered entrepreneurs and participants the prospect of accumulating economic capital and cultural respect. Not always antagonistic

to each other, rude and refined masculinities were (and indeed still are) at the core of mainstream American culture, attitudes and behaviors that white American men use to cultivate and maintain power.

BRIAN P. LUSKEY

BRIAN P. LUSKEY is assistant professor of history at West Virginia University. He is the author of *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (2010).

Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts. By Elise Lemire. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. Pp. 248. Cloth, $29.95.)

Near the beginning of *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Henry David Thoreau expresses wonder that so much attention is being paid to the "somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery" when "there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south." A northern overseer is worse than a southern one, although worst of all is "when you are the slave-driver of yourself," he observes. "Self emancipation even in the West Indian provinces of the fancy and imagination,—what Wilberforce is there to bring that about?" By "foreign," Thoreau meant alien to white people, not foreign to New England; he knew very well that "Negro Slavery" was once a common practice in his beloved Concord, and he tells the stories of Cato Ingraham, Zilpha (Zilpah White), and Brister Freeman and his wife Fenda, former slaves who had occupied Walden Woods within the memory of the oldest Concord residents living in the 1840s.[1]

Despite the popularity of *Walden* since the 1890s, the sections invoking the history of these local New England slaves seem not to have registered with many readers. Elise Lemire, who grew up two miles from Walden Pond, finally read *Walden* in graduate school, discovered the former slaves of Walden Woods, and decided to write the history of slavery in "the nation's birthplace" by exploring the lives of both the African Americans invoked by Thoreau and the Concord families who once owned them (9). The result is *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts*, a rich and absorbing account that seems to confirm Thoreau's notion that northern overseers were worse than southern ones and raises interesting questions about "self-emancipation."

Lemire's book is one of a growing number of efforts to excavate the history of slavery hiding in plain sight in the towns and cities of New England.