

Creating and Consuming Culture in North-East England, 1660–1830

Edited by

HELEN BERRY and JEREMY GREGORY



THE HISTORY OF RETAILING AND CONSUMPTION

ROUTLEDGE

Creating and Consuming Culture in
North-East England, 1660–1830

For Tom Faulkner

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General Editor's Preface

The History of Retailing and Consumption

Series Editor: Gareth Shaw, University of Exeter, UK

It is increasingly recognised that retail systems and changes in the patterns of consumption play crucial roles in the development and societal structure of economies. Such recognition has led to renewed interest in the changing nature of retail distribution and the rise of consumer society from a wide range of academic disciplines. The aim of this multidisciplinary series is to provide a forum of publications that explore the history of retailing and consumption.

Chapter 1

Introduction

HELEN BERRY and JEREMY GREGORY

As befitted a decade which saw a huge amount of discussion about modern-day consumerism, nationalism and regionalism, two topics dominated the agenda of historians who were writing on eighteenth-century England during the 1990s: cultural consumption and diffusion, and national and regional identity. The first topic had its roots in the early 1980s, with the publication of the now-classic collection of essays written by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of Consumer Society: the Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (1982). This became one of the key texts in highlighting the importance of the eighteenth century in the development of a consumerist society, and it alerted historians of the need to turn away from studying changes in production to studying changes in consumption to understand the hallmarks of modern society and its culture. McKendrick's text has been highly influential but it has not gone unchallenged. In particular, its emphasis on an urban 'middling class' which effectively drove the consumer revolution has been queried by those historians who have been concerned that as an explanatory device it had many flaws; for example, it ignored the question of incomes (unless people had more disposable income, how could they purchase these extra goods?). It also marginalised the role of the aristocracy and landed gentry, as well as the role of those below 'middling' ranks, in shaping and buying into the new consumer culture. Some have argued that it is impossible to separate out aristocratic culture from that of the middling sort, preferring to see 'élite culture' as increasingly widely diffused, and that this, in some accounts, helps explain the so-called 'stability' of the mid-eighteenth century. But others have derided the concept of cultural emulation, which this criticism implies, and have explored cultural tensions, which to some extent map on to class differences. Above all, for our purposes, McKendrick's consumer revolution is supposed to have created a national culture and market, which eroded and transcended regional and local cultural forms.

Some of the criticisms noted above, as well as amplifications and workings out of the 'McKendrick thesis', were aired in the monumental trilogy edited by John Brewer, Roy Porter, Ann Bermingham, and Susan Staves,¹ as well as being more directly challenged in the work of Carol Shammas, Beverly Lemire,

¹ John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993); John Brewer and Ann Bermingham (eds), *The Consumption of Culture, 1660-1800: Image, Object, Text* (London, 1995); John Brewer and Susan Staves (eds), *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London, 1995).

Lorna Weatherill, and Peter Borsay.² But despite these objections, the 'McKendrick thesis' has had a wide impact; for instance, many of its insights and assumptions about the importance of the middling sorts helped shape the broader social and political narrative of Paul Langford's *A Polite and Commerical People: England, 1727-1782* (Oxford, 1989) and no collection of essays which aims to explore how culture was consumed, such as this, can ignore it.

The second topic that riveted historians writing in the 1990s was the issue of national and regional identity, which developed in tandem but to a surprisingly large degree independently of the work on cultural consumption. How far contemporary developments such as the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and debates over devolution within the United Kingdom (which to a large extent dominated the domestic political agenda in the 1990s) affected historians working on the eighteenth century is a matter of conjecture, although Linda Colley acknowledges the influence of these events in her thinking while penning her seminal *Britons. Forging the Nation, 1710-1837* (1992). The significance of Colley's work, which explored how and when people living in England, Scotland and Wales (although frustratingly she did not turn her attention to Ireland) began to see themselves as 'British' opened up a new and fruitful topic for historians of the period. Her study initiated some interesting debates: how far was national identity the same as 'nationalism' (which has usually been seen as the preserve of the post-1789 era), and how far did loyalty to Britain subvert and overtake existing loyalties? The 'Colley thesis' was explored and to some extent challenged from two main directions. First, there were those who thought that one of her primary mechanisms for the creation of national identity, Protestantism, was in fact a very unstable basis for nationhood.³ Secondly, there were those who argued that her concentration of the development of a single national identity minimised other 'Scottish', 'Welsh' and 'Irish' identities.⁴ Certainly, Colley's work begged a number of salient questions, the most pressing for the present authors being; who precisely participated in this national culture?

It is interesting that the limits to Colley's Britishness were usually seen as coming from that of rival 'nations'. A few notable works, especially C. Harvie's, *Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics, 1707-1994* (1994), Murray Pittock's *The Invention of Scotland: the Stuart Myth and Scottish Identity* (1991), his *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685-1789*, and Colin Kidd's, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-1930* (1993) are

² Carol Shammas, *The Preindustrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990); Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: the Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800* (Oxford, 1991); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture* (London, 1988; 2nd edn, 1996); and Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1700* (London, 1989).

³ See the essays in Tony Claydon and Ian McBride (eds), *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, 1650-1850* (Cambridge, 1998).

⁴ See Lawrence Brockliss and David Eastwood (eds), *A Union of Multiple Identities. The British Isles, 1750-1850* (Manchester, 1997); and Alexander Murdoch, *British History, 1660-1832. National Identity and Local Culture* (Basingstoke, 1998) for forceful explorations of the attractions of other and competing loyalties.

particularly illuminating in this regard. But given that the contemporary political debate in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has not only been about the creation of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh National Assembly, but also about more devolved regional government and assemblies *within* England (such as that proposed for the North-East, Cornwall, and with less conviction for the North-West), it is noteworthy that few have explored how far those living within eighteenth-century *England* came to see themselves as part of a British, or even as part of an English, national culture. Colley's book begins from the assumption that that battle had already been won, and that the crucial concern in the period after 1707 was how to integrate Scotland and Wales into Britain: she is less concerned with how the English regions were or were not integrated into that English and British whole.

To this extent, Colley's work implicitly mirrors the emphasis of one of the greatest of eighteenth-century travelogues: Daniel Defoe's, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-6). Defoe's *Tour* provides us with a mine of local and regional detail so that it is almost obligatory for historians writing about a particular town or region to begin their study with a quotation from Defoe. But the thrust of his work is to offer an upbeat account of the integrated nature of British economy and society; those regions which do not fit into what he considers to be that march of history are marginalised. Regions and localities within Britain are applauded to the extent that they help the 'national' purpose, and those that do not do this are deemed backward. It is noticeable how in his work (as there was in some of the discussion on identity in the 1990s) there is a constant slippage in the use of the terms 'England', 'Britain', 'English' and 'British'. In large measure, of course, Defoe and Colley may have been right. Those historians who in the 1970s and early 1980s made a vogue for 'county studies' for the period before 1660, and maintained that loyalty to the 'county' was more compelling than loyalty to the 'nation', have been challenged by those who have convincingly argued that county leaders were fully integrated into a national agenda and frame of reference.⁵ If concepts of 'Englishness' were well entrenched, and if loyalty to nation was something which overrode regional loyalties in the period before 1660, then (it could sensibly be suggested) there is not much point worrying about the case after 1660. But county studies usually centred on the attitudes of the county élite. Can we be sure that other social groups felt the hegemonic sense of national identity? In any case, some historians of the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries have demonstrated the persistence of regional and local loyalties which might challenge

⁵ One of the earliest landmarks in the post-war revival of county history writing was W. G. Hoskins, *Devon. A New Survey of England, No. 2* (1954). The publication of county-based works that were especially concerned with the period between the Reformation and Civil War in England gathered pace in subsequent decades, with works such as A. Everitt's *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion* (Leicester, 1966); J. T. Cliffe, *The Yorkshire Gentry from the Reformation to the Civil War* (London, 1969); J. S. Morrill, *Cheshire, 1630-1660: County Government and Society During the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1974); A. J. Fletcher, *A County Community in Peace and War. Sussex 1600-1660, and idem, The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (London, 1981); Clive Holmes, *Seventeenth-Century Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1980). County history writing continues in the formidable project of the *Victoria History of the Counties of England* (see www.englishpast.net). For an over-view of historiographical trends in this area, see Charles Phythian Adams, *Re-Thinking English Local History* (Leicester, 1987).

loyalty to the nation, and so it might be premature to discount the importance of regional identity.⁶ There may therefore be some mileage in thinking about the English regions in the eighteenth century and the issue of their integration into the wider national picture.

Taken together, the essays in this collection address both the topics of cultural consumption and national and regional identity by focusing on the creation and consumption of culture in the North-East of England between 1660 and 1830. They can be seen as the fruits of the first year of an interdisciplinary research project funded by the University of Northumbria, 'Nationalising Taste: Cultural Value and National Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain, with Special Reference to the North-East of England'. That project, directed by Jeremy Gregory, working with Allan Ingram and Thomas Faulkner, with Helen Berry as its first Research Fellow, and Richard Allen as her successor, sought to bring together these two areas of interest. By focusing on a specific region, the project aimed to explore how far identity was bound up with cultural consumption, but also wanted to ask how far the culture created and consumed in the North-East exhibited what might be called 'national' or 'regional' trends, tropes and themes. It is true that, at the general level, some interdisciplinary studies had previously been written which attempted to engage with the question of the interrelationship between culture and national identity. John Lucas, *England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry, 1688-1900* (1990), Michael Dobson, *The Making of a National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1760* (1992) and Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (1993), were important explorations of this theme in literature. Meanwhile, art historians such as John Barrell and David Solkin engaged with similar issues.⁷ Giles Worsley's *Classical Architecture in Britain: the Heroic Age* (1995) and Tom Williamson's *Polite Landscapes: Gardens and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (1995) did much the same for design. But none of these studies was regionally focused, and many were concerned with the interests of a national and metropolitan élite.

The choice of the North-East as a site to test and explore the above literature was not merely one of convenience (although the fact that we were both living and working there at the time certainly helped). Rather, we felt that an exploration of cultural consumption and national identity with reference to the North-East might be useful because the location of the region at the extremity of England, and its position as a border region (providing both a buffer zone and a liminal space between England and Scotland) made it a geographical location particularly well-suited to this task. If McKendrick's and Colley's theses hold true, then they ought to work here. We were also impressed by the range and quality of the hitherto largely untapped primary source materials. Indeed, one of the aims of

⁶ A case in point is made by the contributors to R. Colls and W. Lancaster (eds), *Geordies. The Roots of Regionalism* (Edinburgh, 1992).

⁷ John Barrell, *Painting and the Politics of Culture: New Essays on British Art, 1700-1850* (Oxford, 1992), and David Solkin, *Painting for Money. The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 1993).