

Journal of American Studies, 44 (2010), e55. doi:10.1017/S002187581000160X

Richard Stott, *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, \$55.00). Pp. 376. ISBN 978 0 8018 9137 3.

We all know that with the advent of separate spheres in the mid-nineteenth century, the “civilizing process” of modern industrial society and the increasing purview of the bureaucratic state, society became more orderly, lawful, and decent. And most of the time we think that that is a mixed blessing – understanding, since Weber, Foucault and Elias, that with civilization comes order, bureaucratic predictability, and a strengthening of the normative power of the state to define and constrain the realm of human freedom. We are both freer than when locked into medieval statuses and less aware of the boundaries of that freedom.

But what of the world we have lost? In *Jolly Fellows* historian Richard Stott takes an unflinching look at the casual camaraderie among working-class young white men in the homosocial arenas that populated the mid-nineteenth-century city: saloons, firehouses, brothels, armories, vaudeville houses and gambling halls. Here the nineteenth-century version of “guys” would gather, drink themselves silly, brawl, and swear fraternal love. Having shed blood, sweat and tears, they would vow eternal fidelity to the bonds of brotherhood.

In large cities they occupied “immoral regions,” like New York’s Five Points, home of the infamous B’hoys, or shipyard docks and train stations, where transience meant vulnerability. On the West Coast, they were among the thousands who teemed to San Francisco for the Gold Rush, and later trooped up to Alaska. They were pioneers, adventurers, and urban working-class artisans and laborers.

They read magazines and storybooks filled with lurid violence and gratuitous torment of blacks and women and also animals. All played for laughs. They watched minstrel shows, where white men portrayed slaves who idealized the Old South. They crowded into bare-knuckle boxing matches and other masculine sports.

Theirs was a rough life, filled with backbreaking work, constant danger, and harsh working conditions. And if this was the way they blew off steam, who could blame them?

It was all in good fun, seen as utterly natural and spontaneous, despite the uniforms, the ritualized structure of their activities, and the specificity of their targets. The gangs would often target the weakest member, the one who got most drunk, as if to say that by “drinking himself insensible, the victims made themselves vulnerable” (61).

One of Stott’s virtues is that he does not burnish the image of these jolly fellows with a rosy hue of nostalgia. “Jolly fellowship exploited the weak for the benefit and amusement of the strong,” he writes. “People of color, lunatics, and cripples were degraded as a recreation” (284). They were racist and nativist, especially in New York, where their uniform became the standard look of the Know Nothings, anti-draft rioters, and, later, minstrel shows. Their sexual predation was utterly presumed. Jolly fellows drank, smoked, cursed, brawled – oh, and they also raped women and lynched black men. Life was one big party – if you were white, native-born and male.

Nor does Stott wax poetic on their passing, the result of cultural shifts like the Second Great Awakening and the temperance movement, both of which served the triumph of the modern bureaucratic state and its rationalizing corporate enterprises, and together combined to forever quell the curious admixture of vengeful violence and raucous bonhomie that characterized these homosocial havens. Eventually, Stott argues, the jolly fellows receded into vague cultural memory, as the casual camaraderie of the disorganized working class became an organized, disciplined and bureaucratic union movement. Sports became organized, temperance prevailed.

Oh really? Are we so civilized now? Is all this really so foreign? When Stott describes the B'hoys' recognizable outfits – wide suspenders, polished boots, greased-down hair with long bangs and sideburns and short in back – is it really that far afield from soccer hooligans and skinheads, with their white T-shirts, jeans, suspenders, Doc Martens, and shaved heads? Is it that far off from Crips and Bloods colors? Yesterday's B'hoys became the Jets and the Sharks of the 1950s, skinheads and gangbangers of today.

It may be even closer to home than the dangerous big city. Those affable working-class jolly fellows may have a middle-class cousin on contemporary college campuses, as groups of men gather under ritual symbolic colors and insignia, swear their allegiances to the bonds of brotherhood, get good and drunk, brawl with other “gang” members, hold blackface parties, target the vulnerable (check out “drunk shaming”), and assault women.

Images of the jolly fellow are popular in American culture. These range from the affable Homer Simpson and the “redneck” to the laughable African American sidekick of the police comedies. The jolly fellow images are used to normalize and reinforce socioeconomic inequalities within American society. Their use allows violence by the modern-day white and middle-class jolly fellow to be passed off as comic and acceptable.

The dark side of these jolly fellows was not so jolly for those they targeted – the free blacks they lynched, the Chinese immigrants they tortured, the white-collar men they beat to pulps, and the women they raped.

Today, the civilizing process is incomplete, and the heirs of the jolly fellows continue to fraternize in recognizable ways. Those who simply shrug their shoulders in abject resignation, and sigh “boys will be boys,” lack compassion for those they target, and set the bar far too low on what boys can be. Boys need not be b'hoys. They can become men.

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