

## BOOK REVIEW

**Judith Rowbotham<sup>1</sup>**

**Denis Grube, *The Margins of Victorian Britain. Politics, Immorality and Britishness in the Nineteenth Century*, London: I B Tauris, 2013. ISBN: 978 1 78076 3446**

My starting point is a wish that the main title and the sub-title had been reversed, making it more likely that those interested in legal and crime history would realise in online searches or from publishers' catalogues that this is a book of real interest and relevance to this area! It is a thoroughly enjoyable and generally engagingly written book; almost more a book of interconnecting reflective thematic essays than anything else, but none the worse for that. Indeed, that thematic reflection is one of its strengths because it is a surprising book. It links together a number of themes which you would not always expect to find in a single volume unless in that kind of conference or festschrift volume (mercifully largely now a relic of past publishing history) where a number of disparate essays very broadly addressing an undefined theme or honouring a great scholar, but where it is plain that there is no overall editorial coherence of vision explaining why the different chapters are there together except that they were at the same conference or were students or colleagues of the great scholar. Let me stress again, this book is *not* like that: it is thoroughly coherent and in putting together this particular collection of themes the result is to make the reader realise, in the context of the overarching exploration of the important landmarks of nineteenth century British 'otherness', just how these areas do have a resonance with each other. Without this, would I have thought of explaining the parameters of otherness by putting together attitudes towards Jewishness with those manifested towards atheists, the Irish, prostitutes and homosexuals? No – and certainly not in ways that highlight the points made by Grube in this relatively slim volume.

It is not (and makes no pretence to be) a volume based primarily on detailed and new historical research. From the perspective of the British historian in general, the ground covered is one already familiar to historians of the nineteenth century and there are no real surprises in the sources quoted. Rather, it reads as though written from the perspective of the political scientist who is interested in legislative and social history has read widely in these areas and who has, on that basis, been inspired to look also at the original sources.

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But it is an example of how useful a volume of synthesis can be. It puts together, for instance, his readings of figures like Roger Swift (on Irishness), W.D. Rubenstein (on Jewishness), John Wolfe (on Britishness and religion) with Judith Walkowitz (on prostitution). The work of these authorities in the full details of these areas is backed up by readings from the primary sources (mainly political in orientation). He has looked in newspapers (especially *The Times*) and *Hansard* as well as doing an amount of research in Home Office papers and the papers of various leading politicians. It thus has the ability to refresh our understanding of these areas and to make us realise afresh the nature of the pressures and the calculations made by Victorian politicians (locally and nationally). It is also very readable if you are a contemporary historian, because Grube uses the nineteenth century to make very real points about present dilemmas in the political management of otherness, and explains current dilemmas in the search for a coherent British identity by exploring the importance of that concept to national identity.

Putting on a legal history hat, the book is even more useful, because it forces the reader, particularly if a crime historian, picking up this book to glance at his comments on prostitution or that relating to Jack the Ripper, policing or the Oscar Wilde trial to contextualise these in ways that are often forgotten by them. It is written, quite overtly, from the perspective of the political scientist who values and comprehends the workings of politics and the grand political aspects of crime history can easily be forgotten by historians who look more to the local and the cultural in seeking to understand past criminal justice process. It thus reintegrates crime history into a wider socio-political history of Britain. This may seem to be advocating a return to a more 'old-fashioned' history, but it is not – if it revisits that genre it does so with a fresh eye informed by reading in other areas. History from below has a real value and reminds us that the populace, at any one time, was never supine (think, from the point of those in power, of the many 'perverse' jury decisions of the past). However, we also need to be reminded of the value of elite histories in the area of legal and criminal history. This book serves to remind us of just how important the political dimension is in the legal process. It could reinvigorate a valuable debate into the will and power of government, especially against a background of the broadening franchise, to respond to public pressures for certain changes or continuities to manifest themselves in legislation.

It is not beyond criticism: I could wish (especially in relation to the chapters on the Irish 'other' and on prostitution) that the author had read David Feldman the lawyer as well as David Feldman the historian, for instance, so that he had a securer grasp of the criminal justice process in action as well as in theory. Indeed there are a number of authors not used who are familiar to law and crime historians and a consideration of their work would have

strengthened the chapters here. I think of David Nash's work on blasphemy, for instance, for the chapter on atheism. In many ways, the chapter on prostitution is for me the weakest in the book, because the author does not pick up on the reality that, because the much-hyped (by historians as well as contemporaries) Contagious Diseases Acts 1864-69 did not apply nationally, the outrage was largely metropolitan as well as political (in an early feminist sense). For much of the country, the management of prostitution by law was a matter of magistrates (aided by the local police) deciding whether or not to invoke the Vagrancy Act 1824 in ways which enabled them to label prostitutes idle and disorderly and so susceptible to action against them in the summary courts. The author would find it useful here to look at the PhD summary provided by Leah Bleakley, who is working on local prostitute management at the time when the Contagious Diseases Acts were in force – but they did not apply to Chester, Crewe and Nantwich or Birkenhead. Her research thus gives a very different picture and reminds one of the importance of the need for a better integration of history from below. A good sense of *both* are needed! But overall it is a book which amounts to a valuable addition to the current canon because it does stimulate the mental juices. Personally, I would have welcomed a few more chapters!