

Judith Flanders. *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain*. London: Harper Press, 2006. 492pp.

Judith Flanders's *Consuming Passions* is an immensely readable book, both for the scholar and the layperson, which balances serious research with skilful storytelling. Flanders concretely illustrates how the Industrial Revolution changed the lives of the masses by extending their leisure time and discretionary money. Though she describes a remarkably wide variety of subjects, such as Victorian shop-keeping, newspapers, books, travel, circuses, theatres, music, art, and Christmas celebrations, the book is not merely a collection of isolated facts, but a carefully researched narrative.

Flanders's facts shatter widely held stereotypes about Victorians. *Consuming Passions* portrays them as not only hard-working, respectable people, but also pleasure seekers, opportunists, spend-thrifts, impresarios, voyeurs, and quacks. For example, while it is popular to complain of the violence portrayed in the modern-day media, Flanders reveals that a taste for graphic and scandalous entertainments is nothing new.

“Within a decade of its founding, the Minerva Press was producing about 30 per cent of all the novels published in London... From the late 1830s the ‘blood-and-thunders’ or ‘penny-bloods’ became staples... They were small eight-page booklets with paper covers, which always carried a gory woodcut on the front, and they revolved entirely around violent crime, Gothic horror, and sex” (174).

This is hardly what first springs to mind when one thinks of Victorian novels.

*Consuming Passions* highlights the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the birth of modern marketing and advertising. From Josiah Wedgwood to Gordon Selfridge, Flanders narrates the beginnings of many marketing practices that are now standard, such as catalogues and showrooms, and others that have fallen by the wayside and might strike the modern reader as laughable.

“Out on the streets, advertising was livelier still. The very first omnibus in 1829 carried an advertisement for the Regent's Park Diorama, but that was the very least of it. Carts pulling oversized models of the object to be sold had long been one of the major causes of congestion in the streets, as huge umbrellas, hats, or cheeses fought it out with the private carriages, hackneys, delivery carts, and omnibuses” (286).

Flanders describes the Victorian period as one of cultural change and upheaval and highlights the pivotal role that leisure activities played in this cultural shift.

*Consuming Passions* tells the story of a class struggle that played out in the unlikely field of entertainment.

“The old social system stood firmly on the notion that the upper classes were defined by their lack of employment – the upper classes *were* the leisured classes. By contrast, a leisured working man was an oxymoron: a leisured working man was merely unemployed, idle. The leisure time of the cultivated

was well used; the working classes when idle were probably fomenting disorder, or even crime” (206).

Thus there was an important shift in the nineteenth century from the upper class taking a parental attitude towards the lower class, knowing and dictating what appropriate entertainments were, to market-driven businesses catering to the masses and individuals being flooded with choices about where to spend their newfound time and money.

*Consuming Passions* raises interesting questions about similarities between modern consumer life and the beginnings of the pleasure industry in the nineteenth century. It is an excellent work of history, illuminating the past and offering clues to the origins of some modern practices and attitudes. In Flanders’s account, Victorians are no longer stuffy and staid, but rather living people making real choices that affect others, including their descendents.

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