

Stefan Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 246 pp.

Stefan Collini has long been interested in the role of intellectuals, and more particularly literary critics, in British public life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But in his latest book he examines the tendentious—though not explicitly acknowledged—uses of historical generalization in a number of twentieth-century critics in Britain, beginning with T. S. Eliot, whose vague but pregnant pronouncement on the “dissociation of sensibility” since the seventeenth century insinuated itself into critical discourse as if it were an incontestable fact. Apart from Eliot, Collini focuses mostly on critics active from the 1930s through the 1950s, “a time when . . . such critics occupied a more prominent place in the national culture than either before or since.” Cambridge is heavily represented among the chosen critics: F. R. Leavis, Basil Willey, L. C. Knights, William Empson, Q. D. Leavis, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams (whose *Culture and Society* appeared in 1958).

The basic pattern that Collini identifies is of a narrative of decline more implied than stated, let alone developed in any detail, a narrative in which various contemporary ills—utilitarianism (or something called that, anyway), the triumph of economic over cultural values, the increasing social influence of the sciences, a dissociation of thought and feeling from expression in literature, a degradation of public taste—are treated as manifestations of a radical transformation in English society that had begun after the Elizabethan era and accelerated after the eighteenth century. Since this historical narrative, which Collini assesses, justly, as a kind of pastoral myth, was essentially the instrument of a cultural critique of the present, it

did not demand to be substantiated: “moral confidence and . . . cultural pessimism” were its defining, and mutually reinforcing, characteristics. The ease with which, for example, Eliot’s obiter dicta were accepted as historical truths, or Willey’s idiosyncratic *Backgrounds* to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature established themselves as reliable textbooks, suggests that the underlying discontent with modernity was indeed widespread. In part, the critics whom Collini surveys, with their versions of what they called “cultural history,” supplied a want left unsatisfied by professional historians of the time.

Collini’s summary of Knights’s position applies in its essentials to other critics discussed in the book: “The present is able to see the period stretching from the early seventeenth century to the early twentieth not just as a particular historical phase, but as a pathology, a sickness from which the possibility of recovery is now becoming visible.” Even Empson, ostensibly the most resolutely ahistorical critic of those surveyed, conforms to this pattern to an extent: Collini argues persuasively that *Some Versions of Pastoral* offered “an oblique history” of English class relations that implicitly attributed the decline of the pastoral mode from the seventeenth century to a Puritan hostility to the arts and an increasing self-consciousness about class differences. Of course, Empson’s detestation of Christianity was as outspoken as Eliot’s profession of it, but insofar as Empson was “especially exercised by the appallingness of *Protestant* Christianity,” he too located a fundamental cultural transformation for the worse in England in the seventeenth century.

Williams may seem an odd figure for inclusion, given that he was a Marxist and that his *Culture and Society* and *Long Revolution* presented themselves as historical accounts. But as Collini observes, neither book conformed to the norms of professional historical writing, and neither was much noticed by professional

historians, despite the books' broad public reception. Moreover, as with the other works analysed, *Culture and Society* based a very broad historical claim—about the emergence of the modern concept of culture—on the thinnest of evidence, in this case a single and highly ambiguous use of the word *culture* in Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Though he did not share Eliot's or Leavis's pessimism, Williams too (in a passage quoted by Collini) lamented the predominance in contemporary society of “mechanical ways of thought, feeling, and conjunction,” and he tended to idealize preindustrial life.

As Collini concedes, the sections on figures like Willey and Knights, whose stars in the critical firmament have long since faded, are a bit of a slog; and the chapter on F. R. Leavis is likely to be most interesting to British (and especially Cambridge-educated) readers of a certain age, who can recall the cultural power he exercised in the 1950s and 1960s. The chapters on Empson and Williams, by contrast, are especially compelling for their iconoclastic treatment of critics who continue to be widely read and highly regarded. Although the book notes parallels between, for example, Hoggart's rants against the “directionless but tamed helots of the machine-minding age” and Matthew Arnold's denunciations of middle-class philistinism, Collini's own historical perspective is restricted, a choice he justifies in his postscript.

Despite the appearance of the adjective *nostalgic* in its title, the book itself addresses the phenomenon of nostalgia more implicitly than explicitly. Yet it is reasonable to ask whether the practice of appealing to an idealized, relatively distant past by contrast to, and as a means of deploring, a more recent past to which one attributes whatever is objectionable in the present is not more generally characteristic of literary history (whether identifying itself as such or not). Not unlike the critics analysed by Collini, Thomas Warton, whose *History of English Poetry* (1774–81) was

the first extended literary history in English, regarded the Elizabethan period as the last in which English literature was fully in accord with contemporary political and religious culture, and he thought of his own time, notwithstanding its greater rationality and refinement, as literarily enervated and derivative. Certainly, the coupling of a nostalgic view of the past with a cultural critique of the present has a long history in English literary criticism.

— *Nicholas Halmi*