

In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England. By Keith Thomas (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018. xvi plus 356 pp. \$45.00).

The cover illustration of Keith Thomas' kaleidoscopic study, *In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England*, depicts civility on fine form. The painting portrays a tea party at Lord Harrington's house in 1730s London, where its sitters demonstrate civility as the elite intended it to be. Men and women, their bodies hampered by stiff tailoring, seem trapped in convention, surrounded by polite domesticity in the form of chandeliers, furniture, rugs, silks, tapestries, paintings, playing cards, teapots, and cups.

As Thomas discusses in his book, civility has always had an uncomfortable relationship between appearance and reality, between virtuous ennoblement and the need to subdue impulse. Civility, Thomas acknowledges, lies in the eye of the beholder, meaning different things to different people. What remains consistent is the willingness to use civility and its opposites to classify and categorize, justify and self-assert. While idealized civil bodies were willing to conform to authority, those who resisted English governance or who operated in alternate religious or political systems were often labelled 'savage', 'uncivil', or 'barbarous'.

Thomas has always embraced *longue durée* approaches that remain rooted in human action, feeling, and desire. He tackled early modern belief systems, nature, and social relations in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), *Man and the Natural World* (1983), and *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England* (2009). In these engaging, encyclopaedic studies, a vast number of texts illuminate early modern English life and demonstrate a range of views held by individuals. Like roads to fulfilment and religion, civility is a vast topic, and Thomas shows how historical actors continuously manipulated its meanings. Ingrained in Greco-Roman ideas about the *polis*, the concept involved ideas about society and human rights, celebrating decorous behaviour while effacing what appeared

unpalatable or raw. In some ways, this study builds on Thomas' discussion in *Man and the Natural World*, where the need to 'tame' wilderness spaces became a defining featuring of the early modern era, whether in Shropshire or South Carolina.

Each paragraph in *In Pursuit of Civility* brims with detail, using examples from the Elizabethan era to the Enlightenment. This offers a learned compendia of information, but this piecemeal approach can obscure fundamental tensions that made English civility the fraught, complicated entity it was. The 'dichotomy' that Thomas discusses between civility and savagery was more fluid than the book at times suggests. 'It was not a coincidence that later seventeenth-century England saw both growing politeness and the birth of pornography,' Thomas writes, for the influence of decorum on 'the upper classes was never complete' (p. 48). Such conclusions slight the inherent tensions in civility itself, where codified norms left scope for their subversion. The rising libertinism in seventeenth-century England demonstrates this, where the wit culture of the elite relied on a delicate interaction between polished and rather more appalling behaviour. While Thomas is right to say women were sometimes considered a 'civilizing' force on men, he spends less time discussing the well-established tropes of conquest and possession that men drew on in civil discourse to put pressure on female submission. English gentlemen were given bawdy literary license to imagine fantasies of rape towards any who were considered unruly or irrational. In 1620, the lawyer and colonist Luke Gernon wrote that Ireland was 'a young wench that hath the green sickness for want of occupying...Betwixt her legs, she hath an open harbour...and yet she wants a husband'.¹ Such was the language of the civil civilizer.

The wide range of material through which Thomas divulges early modern mentalities contains the necessary components for a discussion about civility's troubled relationship with expansion and empire. The book touches on slavery, violence, and colonization. Thomas quotes Elizabethans who celebrated 'worthy conquerors' for bringing 'barbarous people' to

¹ Luke Gernon, 'Discourse of Ireland (1620)', *CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts, Cork* <www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E620001> [accessed 21 July 2018], pp. 349-50.

‘civil government’, and cites the lawyer John Davies’ belief that Ireland must be ‘broken’ before it could be governed (p. 164). Similarly, Thomas does say that ‘the notion that it was permissible to impose civilization by force quickly became commonplace’ (p. 164). Brief sections on ‘Xenophobic Masculinity’, ‘Inventing Race’, ‘Fighting and Enslaving’ or ‘Confronting the Barbarians’ seem to promise a deeper engagement with the particularly destructive effects that the English civilizing impetus could have on individuals and groups.

In emphasizing the intellectual and social side of civility, however, the full weight of its influence on justifying political decision-making and imperial expansion is avoided. We learn what role civility played in making the man, but less so in making the nation. The book evades conclusions about how the ‘pursuit of civility’ was deeply rooted in land, property, and dominance; nor does it confront the possibility that subjugation and intervention in the lives of ‘barbarians’ and ‘savages’ was not necessarily an unfortunate symptom of the pursuit of civility but part of its cause and even appeal. To those whom the English purported to ‘civilize’, as to their descendants today, civility was not ‘essentially rhetorical’ (p. 255) but all too real. Seeking to extract natural resources and capitalize on industries on their own estates, eighteenth-century gentlemen sent labourers into coal mines and then likened their blackened faces to those of Africans. Changing tastes in elite architecture, in England and abroad, demonstrated the idealization of order and civil proportions, where Palladian magnificence cast mud houses and plantation slave quarters in its shadows. ‘Nothing is more insulting,’ wrote the earl of Chesterfield in the eighteenth century, ‘than to take pains to make a man feel a mortifying inferiority’.² But while Chesterfield might think it ‘brutally shocking’ to be slighted in the salon, the real brutalities often happened beyond the English built environment, endorsed by the very individuals who lamented the horrors of misusing a fork.

² Philip Dormer Stanhope, earl of Chesterfield, *Advice to his son, on men and manners* (1781), quoted in Markku Peltonen, *The Duel in Early Modern England: Civility, Politeness and Honour* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 307.

The later parts of the book explore how the English, in spite of endorsing expansion and the enslavement of peoples across the globe, were also capable of demonstrating hostility to conquest and an openness to ‘cultural pluralism’ through travel and trade (p. 218). On an individual level, this could be the case. But the ‘views of a minority’ sit uneasily with discussions of ‘African Negroes’ (p. 176) and ‘primitive societies’ (p. 111), categories of description that were so pervasive that they continue to inflect cultural and racial associations. Even as Thomas argues for an anti-imperialist strand of discourse, he acknowledges that such opinions in England were always exceptional. ‘Civilizing’ others was not the obsession of a few fanatics, after all. The cosmopolitan rhetoric of distaste for empire did not exempt individuals from participating in an imperial system: many who ostensibly critiqued empire were willing to benefit financially from investing in joint-stock companies that helped fund early colonialism. When the merchant Richard Watt insisted on ‘civil good natured behaviour’, his primary concern was not morality but economic efficacy in keeping Africans alive for his sugar plantations.³ It is difficult to accept that ‘Montaigne’s blistering attack’ on Spanish conquest was ‘anti-imperialist’ (p. 200) – the English were always very happy to critique their biggest rivals in the Atlantic by slandering their methods of conquest. This was a question over method, not ends. Similarly, Thomas discusses Roger Williams (pp. 190-1), the celebrated founder of Rhode Island who indeed displayed an extraordinarily tolerant view towards Native Americans. But Williams was considered radical even among William Bradford’s godly community in New England; and though he opposed colonization by force, Williams can hardly be considered ‘anti-imperial’ when he helped found one of the original thirteen colonies in North America.

This is not to slight the immense scholarship that this book exhibits. Thomas’ range is tremendous, and he concedes that painting his subject in ‘broad outlines’ will eclipse ‘many

³ Anthony Tibbles, “‘My interest be your guide’: Richard Watt (1724–1796), Merchant of Liverpool and Kingston, Jamaica”, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 166 (2017), pp. 25-44, at p. 30.

complex matters' (pp. xv-xvi). Thomas has succeeded in raising attention to the numerous facets of civility that served as points of discussion about behaviour. Readers who revisit the cover after finishing the book will understand the elite aspirations of virtue and refinement embodied in Lord Harrington's tea room, and Thomas concludes his study with a worthy appeal for a more inclusive future that is tolerant of difference. Moving towards such a society, however, necessitates a deeper acknowledgement that despite its rhetoric of 'personal liberty' and 'humanity' (p. 255), the English pursuit of civility was contingent on forced human labour, global consumption, and imperial devastation, the legacies of which continue to haunt societies and peoples across the globe.

Lauren Working
TIDE project,
University of Liverpool
l.working@liverpool.ac.uk