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Review of: Victoria Kelley, *Soap and Water: Cleanliness, Dirt and the Working Classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010)

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Victoria Kelley, *Soap and Water: Cleanliness, Dirt and the Working Classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2010, xii + 240 pp., h/b, £56, ISBN 978 18488 50521

This monograph is based on Dr Kelley's PhD research, undertaken in the History of Design department at the Royal College of Art and at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The book is by no means narrowly focused on design history, however, and demonstrates a wide interest in, and familiarity with, the social history of its era. It belongs to a growing, and healthy, trend to use some of the methods of anthropology in the study of social history: above all, the search for the meanings of particular forms of behaviour.

Kelley uses this approach to examine the by now well-documented growth in the emphasis on cleanliness witnessed in Britain in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She notes, of course, that elite writers ('authoritative' or 'civilising' discourses, as she calls them) were at pains to promote working-class cleanliness, and is good on the cultural politics of all this. Adrian Forty, the design historian, is quoted on the metaphor of dirt for disorder, and the theory that some of this new concern was really produced more by middle-class anxiety about the ungovernability of the working class than a literal interest in cleanliness or dirt. Not all of this will be new to readers of *Labour History Review*. Students of the British working class of this period will already be familiar with the accounts of commentators like Margaret Loane, Maud Pember Reeves, Jack London, and Lady Bell, who make their inevitable appearances in Kelley's discussion. For the newcomer, the first chapter is an accessible survey of elite attitudes to poverty and its causes in the 1880s and the following decades, which highlights the important symbolic place of cleanliness as a marker of class distinction and of housewives' alleged moral worth. Other readers will probably want to skim through this more quickly.

Thankfully, Kelley does not believe that the influence of middle-class figures was the whole story. One of the main strengths of the book is her willingness to question the self-serving discourse of 'progress' by which these commentators and campaigners claimed the improvement in hygiene as their own work. Her second chapter, based mainly on autobiographical material, is the heart of the book. She poses the question (while ultimately conceding she cannot answer it) whether working-class people's own developing values were not a more important cause. The theme of working-class aspirations for better living standards is an important one in the history of the later nineteenth century. Kelley's work supports the argument that there was a widespread trend to expect and demand more, encouraged by rising real wages. There is enough autobiographical evidence to support the claim that working-class couples were often looking back to the meagre conditions of their own childhoods and demanding more for their own children.

To apply this interpretation to Kelley's own subject of cleanliness requires us to

show that working-class mothers pursued cleanliness in order to promote their families' health rather than, for example, primarily to pursue social status, and she does this with a good range of material. I was surprised that she did not draw on Joel Mokyr's important article 'Why "More Work for Mother"?', or the work of Jan de Vries on household consumption, which would both have supported this interpretation. They argue that the nineteenth-century British working class was particularly good at taking up newly available knowledge about health and disease.

Kelley sensibly identifies many different gradations of income and respectability within the working class (or, as she prefers, 'working classes'), but has a tendency to overlook the impact of occupational and regional variation. This makes the argument simpler (and is partly dictated by the scarcity of really good sources), but sacrifices some of the richness and variety which should also be part of the picture. 'Place' is a more important component than Kelley's treatment allows. A lot of the time this is actually a book about London, and none the worse for that, but London's working class had its own special characteristics, and when Robert Roberts' Salford or Lady Bell's Middlesbrough are added to the mix without comment on possible regional differences, we are entitled to wonder what we are missing. For example, Elizabeth Roberts' hugely important work on Lancashire (not quoted by Kelley) has produced an archive of oral history testimony which can be used to good effect, as Lucinda Beier has shown in *For Their Own Good: The Transformation of English Working-Class Health Culture, 1880–1970* (Columbus, Ohio: 2008). As with place, so with occupation: I doubt if Kelley would have us think that the cultural significance of dirt was identical to coal miners and textile workers, but the differences are not explored here.

Overall, this is a valuable book which takes our understanding forward in several ways. Kelley's third chapter introduces another important group of sources, soap advertisements, and she writes with insight on both advertisers' goals and on the working-class reception of their messages. Soap and Water also deserves our attention for its use of autobiographical material, which provides clear evidence that autonomous working-class aspirations for improvement played their part in Britain's growing cleanliness. On a simpler level, Kelley provides some fascinating descriptions of the nature of dirt, cleanliness, and cleaning practices, such as Hannah Mitchell rising early on her wedding day in Bolton in 1895 to find that 'every neighbour had risen earlier still, cleaned her windows and whitened the flags both back and front ... giving the whole street quite a festive appearance ... a little act of kindness which always seemed to me one of the loveliest things I have ever known.'

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