

Article

The Emergence of Cultural History

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WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED TO DO THIS? I'm a Professor of Eighteenth-Century Studies in the Department of English at Queen Mary. My undergraduate training was in English, History, and Philosophy. I did my PhD in an English department. The particular branch of English Studies I do, which is eighteenth-century studies, has always been relatively interdisciplinary in character. I guess that is what this conference is about; it's about how we do interdisciplinary research today.

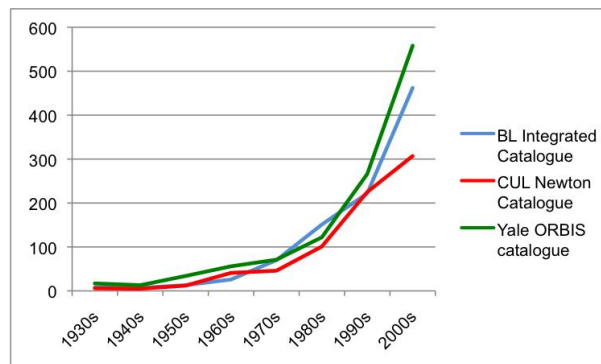
In 2004 I published a book about the history of coffee-houses, and it was called *The Coffee-House: A Cultural History*. It was about the history of our ideas about coffee and coffee-houses. To be honest, I'm not sure why I gave it that subtitle. I knew I wanted the book to count as history, because there's a general market for history in bookshops that there isn't anymore for literary criticism. I also know that my editor, who was mildly curious about coffee-houses — even though he was, he said himself, a 'tea man' — especially hated the subtitle. He thought 'cultural history' was death for any book in the general market.

Cultural history, then. What are we talking about? It seems to me that these are two words with a lot of aura, words that probably mean less together than apart. It seems to me there is a lot of tacit agreement about the practice of cultural history, and much less about the theory of

it. The theory of it goes back a long way. Perhaps we will be able to tease out some of those strands today.

Most historians seem to imagine that cultural history is a branch of their discipline, albeit one much infected by, or influenced by, methodologies drawn from other disciplines that are nearby. That's the kind of argument that Peter Burke advanced in his book *What is Cultural History?*, now in its second edition.¹ This is a travesty of his argument, but anyway: his book locates cultural history as the end point of a complicated interaction between the discipline and methodology of history and the theory wars (postmodernism, Foucault, feminism, etc.). In one section he makes a very helpful comment, that cultural history is not simply a branch of the discipline of history — it is multidisciplinary. Rather than its being part of history, then, we might conceive of cultural history as a multidisciplinary project finding its home in a number of cognate, nearby disciplines. We are all used to the term interdisciplinary research, but we might think more about we mean by *multidisciplinary* research on a topic carried out in different disciplines.

So I'm going to make several points. The first is that cultural history is currently very popular and/or fashionable. Here's a small experiment I undertook using the catalogues of three big research libraries — the British Library, the Cambridge University Library, and Yale University Library — searching for the phrase 'cultural history' used in titles of books, organized by decades (which some catalogues allow you to do).



The emergence of cultural history

Decade	BL Integrated Catalogue	CUL Newton Catalogue	Yale ORBIS catalogue
1930s	8	6	17
1940s	7	5	13
1950s	13	12	34
1960s	26	41	56
1970s	70	46	71
1980s	151	101	122
1990s	222	225	266
2000s	462	307	558

Search for the phrase 'cultural history' in title, including multiple copies, editions etc [numerous reasons for treating the data with a grain of salt]
 (i) in BL Integrated Catalogue by decade. 959 total
 (ii) in University of Cambridge Newton Library Catalogue. 751 total.
 (iii) in Yale University ORBIS catalogue. 937 total

Figs. 1 and 2. The emergence of cultural history.

There are lots of reasons to be very circumspect about the data, but it does, I think, indicate the recent prominence of cultural history, especially the explosion of books in the last decade or so which express an allegiance to cultural history in their titles.

The term was associated early in the 1930s with a series published by the Cresset Press, a left-wing press in London.² Now, what characterizes cultural history is its omnivorous curiosity. Burke has a list in his book: calendars, causality, climate, corsets, examinations, facial hair, fear, impotence, insomnia, magic mushrooms, masturbation, nationalism, pregnancy, things, and tobacco.³

In my discipline, the indication that cultural history is current is notable in the subject overview report for the recent Research Assessment Exercise (2008), where the assessors were asked to comment on 'Developments in Research in English'. They argued that 'the currently dominant approach to research in English appears to be broadly historicist in orientation and method', and went on to observe

the powerful emergence of various kinds of cultural history [in English studies]. Research in cultural history could take the form of attention to literary writers, placing them at the centre of attention and extrapolating towards broader-based analysis integrating other material. At the same time, this kind of work could also centre on topics without a founding orientation in English language or literature, although literature, or rhetorical forms, or shifts in language use could be included in the research and were often perceptively analysed. Frequently, studies in cultural history included literature as one of a variety of cultural, intellectual or artistic forms to be examined.⁴

Intriguingly, the same report in History barely mentions cultural history; the term was used once.

There is an extensive historiography of cultural history, as you would expect, exploring the different historiographical traditions that cultural history emerges from: the German Burkhardtian model; the French historical study of *mentalités*; the cultures of plebeian Europe; the Williams/Hoggart/Hall model of British cultural studies which emerged in the 1950s and 60s, and which paid attention for the first time, it seemed, to the values and expressions of British working class culture, of teenagers, of Black British culture; or, more recently, the historical anthropology model of Clifford Geertz, with its notion of thick description.

The dominant account, though, is that cultural history emerges out of the problems of social history, especially its determination that 'class' is the only significant category of analysis. Here's a useful summary by the social historian Penny Summerfield, defending and defining the Social History Society's purpose in the recent past, especially their renewed interest in cultural history in the last few years. This is from the Society's website:

Social History is a dynamic and popular force within academia and in our wider society. The Social History Society was founded in 1976, when, to quote Geoff Eley, social history worked 'within a self-confident materialist paradigm of social totality, grounded in the primacy of class' (*A Crooked Line*, 2005). That vision of social totality was challenged in the ensuing years by developments that include, among others, women's history, oral history, black history, postcolonial history, and the history of sexualities. Confidence in the materialist paradigm took a knock: cultural history moved in to take its place. The Social History Society did not stand by and wring its collective hands, but readily embraced these changes. In particular, with the founding of its journal *Cultural and Social History* in 2003, the Society refused a polarized division between the social and the cultural.⁵

What this argument suggests is that cultural history is related to or a critique of diverse historiographical forebears. That's relevant and interesting, but cultural history has an equally profound relationship with English Studies, or more generally, those disciplines focused on mediated evidence, such as literary studies, other languages, music history, art history.



Fig. 3. 'Interior of a London Coffee House in 1668' (c. 1705).

That's why I came to be interested in something which might be called a cultural history, in the coffee-house project. The challenge for writing that book was the range of evidence that was available for it. Coffee emerged in Britain in the mid-seventeenth century, derived from the practice of drinking it in the Ottoman Empire. The first coffee-house opened in London in 1652 during the English Republic. Especially in the early period, there was some evidence concerning coffee-houses in parish records, court reports, business history, some diaries — all evidence that might be thought of as positive and quantitative in some way, in social history terms. But ever since Macauley's *History of England* in the mid-nineteenth century, historians of the coffee-house had relied

on a corpus of printed texts and images for evidence of what going to a coffee-house was like.

This group of texts were the real focus of my interest in the topic. They seem to have been systematically mistreated methodologically. They were treated as if they were a direct description of the experience of going to the coffee-house, rather than what they were, which is complex and complicated literary forms. Short, vulgar satires printed chiefly in pamphlet form, mostly in dialogue with each other, making use of burlesque and parodic forms, keenly interested in literary and linguistic experiment, deliberately using low and vulgar language, mixed in with extensive literary and political allusion.

They have titles like *The Women's Petition against Coffee*, *The Maiden's Complaint Against Coffee*, or *The Coffee-House Discovered*. In the *Maiden's Complaint* (1663), there is a scene in which two young servant women, Dorothy and Jane, discuss the effect the coffee-house has on their boyfriends, complaining that they spend so much time there drinking coffee and gossiping about politics that the men have no energy or time left for courtship. As Dorothy says, since 'our Toby [...] drank Coffee, he is no more like the man he was, than an apple's like an Oyster', to which Jane replies, 'I believe the Devil first invented this liquour, on purpose to plague our Sex'. They both lament their fate — in particular, that they will have no chance to lose their virginity. Dorothy says that rather than give herself up to a man who drinks coffee, she may as well 'wrap my Maiden-head in my smock, and fling it into the Ocean to be bugger'd to death by young Lobsters'.⁶



Fig. 4. *The Maidens Complaint Against Coffee* (1674).

These texts were used by Victorian historians, and subsequently by others in the twentieth century, as evidence for what coffee-house-going was like. And there may be some truth in these depictions — it is true that women were not expected to be in the coffee-house, and Dorothy and Jane are standing outside it, lamenting the fact that it is full of men inside. But this is obviously complicated evidence of an experience, because it is satirical, because of its interest in using low and vulgar language. It uses these satirical modes of the mock petition or complaint, different forms of the genres of authority that they burlesque and travesty.

Satire, of course, is notoriously difficult to read. It is clearly strongly connected to the culture of everyday life. It offers itself as criticism of excessive forms of behavior, establishing boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable forms of behavior, labelling some as folly or vice, and inviting readers to reflect and reform. Satire does see itself as embedded in real life, and as such, these scabrous, vulgar satires would seem to be about something historical. But to do so you need a complex model of what a literary text is. That is what I thought the discipline that I come from could offer the project, because what English Studies teaches you is to pay close attention to texts and their possible modes of production and reception. It offers a complex model of mediated evidence, making use of specialist tools like narratology, bibliography or book history, genre

theory, close reading, literary and theoretical studies of gender and power, intertextuality, rhetorical theory, reception studies. And other disciplines would come up with a different list from the nature of their training, whether they be geography, or anthropology, or art history.

Peter Burke's book *What is Cultural History?* seems to me to be overly nervous about the potential for multidisciplinary cultural history. For he tends to see cultural history as history that has been infected, or encroached on, by neighbouring disciplines, like English, or art history, or anthropology, or geography. He tends to see history in the middle, assailed from these different quarters. But I think multidisciplinary might actually be an interesting way to get out of that. The practice of cultural history seems to be undertaken largely extradisciplinarily from history — that it is, often, multidisciplinary, using methodologies or topics or training from one discipline to bear on a historical problem, but not really becoming essentially 'history'. So what I think we're doing today is that we're asking ourselves what is it that my discipline can do for me, and what use can I make of my training in this research problem that I want to explore?

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Notes

Editors' note: This is a version of a prepared text edited with reference to its recorded delivery.

¹ Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 135.

² See George Bailey Sansom, *Japan: A Short Cultural History* (London: Cresset Press, 1931), Hugh George Rawlinson, *India: A Short Cultural History* (London: Cresset Press, 1937).

³ Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, p. 131.

⁴ 'Panel M: UOA 57 — English Language and Literature', *RAE2008 Subject Overview Reports* <<http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2009/ov/>> [accessed 12 October 2011] (Archived by WebCite® at <<http://www.webcitation.org/62NX4jKaT>>). The report continued: 'Much of this work was interdisciplinary in intention and much was successful. However the sub-panel also read a minority of work in this vein that was less well sustained, whose knowledge base was too lightly researched, and which relied on over-generalisation'.

⁵ Penny Summerfield, 'A Message from the Chair', *Social History Society* <<http://www.socialhistory.org.uk/>> [accessed 12 October 2011] (Archived by WebCite® at <<http://www.webcitation.org/62NXBkKAb>>)

⁶ Merc. Democ., *The Maidens Complain[t] Against Coffee* (1663), p. 3.

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