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Old friends

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B arbara Black A ROOM OF HIS OWN A literary-cultural study of Victorian clubland 328pp. Ohio University Press. £50.95 (US $59.95).

978 0 8214 2016 4 London's clubland is by no means a spent force: the Younger Members Inter-Club Group, for example, was in full social swing last summer. Drawn from members who are under the age of thirty-five, this clubwithin-clubland is alive and well, with a hectic calendar and a Gatsbyesque buzz about it. Garden parties, dinners, balls, tennis matches and wine tastings are the setting for furious flirting, chatting and networking. Barbara Black, in A Room of His Own: A literary-cultural study of Victorian clubland, argues that the club culture of Victorian London survives through Facebook and other social media: "the human appetite for social communication and community has only intensified since the nineteenth century". In fact, Black does not even have to look as far as social media to prove her point; the Inter-Club Group, as it flits from the Royal Automobile Club to the Hurlingham, from the Lansdowne to the Oriental, shows that the next generation of "clubbable" men and women are already well aware of the benefits of what Black calls "network culture". The network culture depicted and analysed in Black's study, of course, did not extend freely to all, as her title makes clear. Her book is an absorbing and enlightening study of the importance of clubs to the formation of upperand upper-middle class Victorian masculinity, as the Victorian gentleman searched for "a room of his own", separate from both home and the workplace. Black takes us on a chronological tour of the Victorian gentleman's clubs in London and the colonies. As a literary scholar, she focuses on the literary and journalistic representations of club culture, but this leads her to scrutinize the general cultural significance of the figure of the "clubbable" man. Indeed, it is striking how many well-known writers were club members, with clubland occupying a central part in their lives. Trollope, Disraeli, Thackeray, Bram Stoker, the journalist G. A. Sala, H. Rider Haggard, Kipling and Wilde were members of clubs, often several different ones at once. But clubhouses were places of rivalry as well as friendship. Black discusses the so-called Garrick Club affair of 1858, which flared up after Dickens's young friend Edmund Yates published an anonymous sketch about Thackeray which did not paint that eminent author in a flattering light.

When Thackeray found out that the author of the piece was a fellow member of the Garrick, he was furious at what he felt was a betrayal of the principles of club brotherhood, and had Yates expelled. Dickens, another Garrick member, resigned from the club committee in protest; he and Thackeray only reconciled in 1863 in the hall of the Athenaeum, near the coats at the staircase.

For Black, the Victorian gentleman's club is a representation of embattled masculinity just as much as it is a statement of masculine power and confidence. It was the gentleman's retreat from the feminizing effects of domesticity, and from uncertainty over exactly how much sway was held by "the-man-in-the-house", just as much as it constituted an entrance into the right networks and the right social circles. But Black points to Ruskin's famous essay "Of Queen's Gardens" (1865), with its theory of the separate spheres for men and women. The unstable pronouns of Ruskin's declaration that a husband guards his wife from trouble "within his house as ruled by her" present, for Black, an "alternative statement of domestic

agency": "Is the man's house, 'as ruled by her', his castle after all?", and was this the reason behind the Victorian gentleman's desire to escape to an "elsewhere-than-home" at his club? Were the nineteenth century's idealization of family life and the growth of gentlemen's clubs in some way linked? Of course, a man chafing against domesticity still had more power over his home than his wife did, especially before the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 allowed married women to own and to control their own property.

Black deftly reveals how every club is a statement of both exclusion and inclusion; it needs its outsiders to help to define those whom it chooses to let in. She is most interested in those clubs with their own clubhouses, in Pall Mall and around St James's, rather than the less formal clubs and societies that grew up around the Strand and Covent Garden in the early years of Victoria's reign, where likeminded friends such as Douglas Jerrold and G. H. Lewes met in taverns or in rooms above them. The many working men's clubs that sprang up across Victorian London are also not what Black chooses to investigate here. Her chapters on the importance of club culture to the novel and the press are excellent. She makes the point that a newspaper or periodical is itself a kind of club, where the network of like-minded individuals becomes the organizing principle; this has been suggested elsewhere before, notably by Benedict Anderson, but not in the context of Pall Mall's clubland. Black's readings of major novels by Thackeray and Trollope made me think in new ways about old favourites, as did her analysis of the role of colonial clubs in Kipling's short stories. Her chapter on The Forsyte Saga betrays its origins as a journal article, but otherwise the narrative flows well, as she moves from the early to the late Victorians.

The idea of the club is sometimes used too metaphorically, as a way of discussing masculine culture in fiction where there are no actual clubhouses in the story (as in Robert Louis Stevenson's Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde). Overall, however, she argues convincingly that clubs began as places intended to help form the ideal Victorian cosmopolitan gentleman of Empire, but became places where one "dropped in to drop out". Barbara Black is at her best when digging up obscure details and lesser-known works, such as Stevenson's tale The Suicide Club (1878), about a group of men who play a dangerous card game where the odds are loaded in favour of death. She ranges over the century with ease, and her obvious enthusiasm and love for London's old clubhouses and club culture make this a very readable book, which should itself be stocked in club libraries. I was very interested to learn in the epilogue of the large number of womenonly clubs that flourished in the 1890s, alongside the few clubs that began to allow ladies inside. These homes-from-home, such as the Pioneer, the Alexandra and the Empress, offered the lady-shopper respite from the bustle of Oxford Street, and provided the sporting or culturally minded lady with opportunities to enjoy her favourite pursuits and (most worrying of all to many anxious commentators) to make independent professional connections. The Victorian gentleman may have searched for "a room of his own", albeit one shared with other men, but by the end of the century clubs enabled women, too, to escape from domestic confines.