

Manly men and angelic women: Gender and nostalgia in George Elgar Hicks's watercolour *The Sinews of Old England* (1857) and in an advertisement for Cadbury's Cocoa (1886).

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Abstract: *The Sinews of Old England* depicts an idealised labourer and his family at the door of their cottage. Cadbury's Cocoa used a similar image for an advertisement some thirty years later. This essay argues that both images carry messages about gender, class and work; invoking an idealised British past and promoting romanticised gender roles which were used to lend strength and credibility to the growing Cadbury brand. The work of John Ruskin and Samuel Smiles taught men and women how to inhabit their proper station in life, and these two images reinforce this prevailing conservative mind-set which kept women behind closed doors while their men dealt with public life, in whatever form was suitable for them.

Throughout the nineteenth century, as industry and modern politics took shape in Great Britain, there was much discussion about the state of the nation and the roles of the people who inhabited it. In this essay I will argue that by reading contemporary artefacts in the context of these debates, some light can be thrown upon the attitudes of their originators. Specifically, by contrasting a watercolour, *The Sinews of Old England* by George Elgar Hicks (1824-1914), with an advertisement for Cadbury's Cocoa it is possible to examine the creators' ideals surrounding gender and work, and to locate these ideas within the wider setting of the era.

Completed in 1857, *The Sinews of Old England* (*The Sinews* hereafter; watercolour heightened with bodycolour and gum Arabic on paper, 76 x 53.5cm, Yale Center for British Art)¹ presents a manual labourer with his wife and child, at the doorway of their home. The watercolour depicts an extremely idealised view of working class life, showing a muscled – but not unduly so – navvy heading to work, in clean clothes that look no more than a little worn, pick-axe resting on his shoulder as he gazes outwards with shining eyes. He is healthily tanned, clean-shaven apart from a neat chin-strap beard, and confident. His wife, described by Tim Barringer as having the face ‘of a Raphael Madonna’,² gazes in adoration at her husband, her smooth forehead bearing no trace of worry. At the man's feet, a well-fed, clean and cherubic child – probably male, although still in skirts³ – holds a wooden trowel. A spade with the same shape handle as the trowel is just visible over the man's shoulder, being carried on the shaft of his pick-axe; the child will clearly follow in his father's shiny-booted footsteps. The doorway of the cottage is surrounded by well-tended and largely ornamental plants. Inside, a table with a clean white cloth holds a cup of tea in willow pattern china, while shelves on the back wall display more china in a similar design. The woman's sleeves are rolled up, and her fresh yellow over-skirt is tucked up, suggesting she is ready for a day of domestic labour and child-care in a cottage which already looks clean and well-kept. It is worth noticing that her hands show no trace of work; as Leonore Davidoff notes, ‘Throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, the mark of genteel womanhood was white,

¹ The image is available at: ‘The Athenaeum - *The Sinews of Old England*, George Edgar Hicks - 1857’ <<http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=39863>> [accessed 17 February 2013].

² Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), p.30.

³ Barringer, p. 30.

unblemished hands.⁴ She has a pleasantly curvy figure, and with her shiny hair and bright eyes, she looks as well-fed and healthy as her husband and child. In short, it is an impossibly optimistic depiction of the dignity of labour, of the ‘deserving poor’. There is no hint of poverty or want; in fact, it almost seems as though this healthy young couple have made a conscious decision to live a life of respectable simplicity and virtuous labour.

The couple in the painting stand on the threshold of their cottage, at the boundary between domestic and public realms. This is a visual representation of the ‘separate spheres’ ideology ‘whereby men were figured as competitors in the amoral, economic realm while women were positioned as either decorative trophies or spiritual guardians of men's immortal souls’.⁵ These idealised gender roles were not just theoretical positions; although they were strengthened by the arguments of such writers as Ruskin, they were also the subject of much discussion and concerned investigation, even by Parliament. There was perceived to be an issue with mothers who worked for remuneration, and who were therefore unable to take proper care of their children, homes and husbands. Many working-class women went out to work, or took in homework, in order to help ends meet. Their children were looked after by relatives or neighbours, although:

Parliamentary commissioners were shocked by the chemists' and medical officers' reports of widespread use of opiates to quiet hungry and fretful infants so that their mothers could do the work necessary for the family's subsistence.⁶

As shocking as this may have been, ‘the members of Parliament and social reformers who were concerned with infant mortality and the “working mother problem” did not acknowledge that most working-class women had to bring cash into their households at some time during their married lives.’⁷ Applying middle- and upper-class standards to working-class communities, the reformers could not imagine that a woman's duties could or should encompass anything more than staying at home to be the ‘Angel in the House’.⁸ ‘The feminine, always regarded within a familial context, became an idealized carrier of morality.’⁹ The combined concepts of the Angel in the House, motherhood and home became charged with meaning, as women were supposed to stay in and provide an example of moral and religious perfection for the restful homecoming of their husbands. As Ruskin puts it, women were ‘made to be the helpmate of man’;¹⁰ however this meant, above all, creating a home.

And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermilion, shedding its quiet light far, for those who else were homeless.¹¹

The woman in *The Sinews* seems to be the embodiment of these virtues. Devoted, beautiful, serene, she keeps a clean house, makes her husband his morning cup of tea, and

⁴ Leonore Davidoff, ‘Regarding Some “Old Husbands’ Tales”: Public and Private in Feminist History’, in *Feminism: The Public and the Private*, ed. by Joan B. Landes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 172.

⁵ Jan Marsh, ‘Gender Ideology & Separate Spheres in the 19th Century - Victoria and Albert Museum’ <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/g/gender-ideology-and-separate-spheres-19th-century/>> [accessed 19 January 2013].

⁶ Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 87.

⁷ Rose, p. 76.

⁸ Coventry Patmore, *Angel in the House*, 2003 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4099>> [accessed 27 January 2013].

⁹ Davidoff, p. 174.

¹⁰ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies: Two Lectures Delivered at Manchester in 1864* (Smith, Elder & Co., 1865), p. 124.

¹¹ Ruskin, p. 149.

sends him on his way into the wide world with the knowledge that she – his home – will be waiting for him at the end of a hard day. The viewer is allowed only a glimpse through the doorway; after all, it would be most inappropriate to pry into a woman's personal domain.

It was not just women, however, that had to attempt to reach unrealistic or idealistic standards of perfection. Men, too, were expected to live in a certain way. Ideals of 'manliness' were prevalent throughout the nineteenth century:

The Victorian era is almost synonymous with the ideology of 'great men' [...] Throughout the era, 'masculine' values of courage and endeavour supported military campaigns and commercial expansion.¹²

As Ruskin put it at the time, 'The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender.'¹³ For a working-class male like the man in *The Sinews*, however, the virtues of adventure and discovery are unlikely to have been attainable. Instead, he could aspire to the sort of manliness espoused by Samuel Smiles:

Riches and rank have no necessary connection with genuine gentlemanly qualities. The poor man may be a true gentleman, in spirit and in daily life. He may be honest, truthful, upright, polite, temperate, courageous, self-respecting and self-helping: that is, be a true gentleman. The poor man with a rich spirit is in all ways superior to the rich man with a poor spirit.¹⁴

As the century progressed, there was a sustained emphasis on the physicality of men. In pre-industrial times, strength had been necessarily linked with the ability to provide for a family. As the machine age progressed and factory work made it possible for men – and indeed women – of all statures to earn a similar wage, the idea of a manly physique started to manifest itself instead through the ideas of bodily health, sporting prowess and physical fitness. Figures such as Emile Sandow, a body builder whose publications on physical fitness were popular in the last years of the century, equated 'the muscular physical form with individual strength and success, national resurgence and Imperial well-being.'¹⁵ Ideals of the male body as heroic and under control were crucial. While these ideas appear rather later in the century than *The Sinews*, it is undeniable that the painting displays a distinct form of manliness as an ultimately desirable attribute. The man in the painting is muscled, but in a fine, controlled way. He is lean and healthy, and has gained this through honest hard work; and he is on his way to undertake another day of labour. He is able to provide fully for his wife and child, protecting them from the harsh realities of the world. He is an admirable specimen of manliness.

These ideas continue to build throughout the nineteenth century, and it is fascinating to see them come through in a variety of media. One controversial new medium was the advertisement, which had gained prominence as periodicals flourished in the 1850s. While some firms were reluctant to take part in this vulgar new practice, others such as Cadbury saw the potential;¹⁶ and from the 1860s they had been advertising their 'Cocoa Essence' as 'Absolutely Pure. Therefore Best.' This referred to the innovative production technique which allowed them to do away with additives and to remove much of the excess cocoa butter. They

¹² Marsh. (paragraph 11 of 21)

¹³ Ruskin, p. 146.

¹⁴ Samuel Smiles, *Self help; with illustrations of conduct and perseverance*, 1997, p. 206 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/935>> [accessed 23 January 2013].

¹⁵ John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), p. 44.

¹⁶ The refusal to advertise of Quaker chocolate manufacturers Rowntree is discussed here: Gillian Wagner, *The Chocolate Conscience* (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1987), p. 29.

concentrated on the health benefits of this product, helped by studies in such august journals as *The Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*. By the 1880s, they were regularly producing advertisements such as the second artefact, the 'Blacksmith' advert, which appeared in the *Illustrated London News* on 11th December 1886.¹⁷ This engraving, by an artist only identifiable as 'J.B.B.' or 'L.B.B.' sits above some fairly small print extolling the health-giving benefits of the drink:

Muscular strength, physical endurance and staying power – Cadbury's Pure Cocoa is recommended by the Medical Profession as an agreeable article of healthy diet for all classes. It sustains against hunger and fatigue, and contains in a concentrated form all the elements indispensable to the development of the body. It is a pure, refined beverage; nutritious, stimulating, digestible, comforting, suitable for all seasons, all climes and all occasions. A Sixpenny Packet provides fourteen large breakfast cups of strong delicious Cocoa. Beware of Imitations.¹⁸

The image is of a small girl entering a blacksmith's forge with a cup of steaming Cadbury's Cocoa. The smith, presumably the girl's father, looks up from the horseshoe he is hammering, and seems pleased to see her. He wears a shirt, unbuttoned and revealing part of his chest, showing what hot, hard, manly work he is doing. He has his sleeves rolled up, displaying some impressive muscles. Behind him, an atmospherically lit younger man – perhaps his apprentice – is at the furnace, sparks flying out. Through the open doorway it is possible to see a quiet rural scene outside, with a woman standing at the door of a cottage. This appears to be the mother, hands on hips, watching her little girl deliver much needed refreshment to the hard-working man.

Using similar imagery as *The Sinews*, this image clearly shows that the ideals of honest labour and separate spheres were firmly in the general consciousness, enough to be brought into a magazine advert. The viewer is shown the world of the hot, smoky, sweaty male sphere of work, contrasted with the bright lane visible outside the door, and the cottage home just across the way. The men are where they should be, and the woman is firmly placed at her low doorway, not venturing outside or leaving her realm unattended. The little girl has been allowed to cross into a world that is not hers, but only because she is performing the very female duty of bringing sustenance to the working man, while being monitored by her mother to ensure she does not cross any other boundaries. She is learning her role in life at a young age.

Cadbury's late-nineteenth century advertisements show a variety of upstanding men (a postman, a fireman, a group of explorers) all enjoying their cocoa; as well as instances where the health benefits are given even more emphasis (a doctor recommending cocoa to a middle-class female patient; a trio of images showing that cocoa is suitable for young children, sporty young men and the elderly). In many cases it is possible to see that gender roles are fixed, and manliness is highly prized. For the company repeatedly to use such imagery suggests that these ideals matched those of the firm. By the late 1800s, the company was being run by George and Richard Cadbury. Of strict Quaker upbringing, the men were keen to promote a healthy alternative to drinking alcohol. As children they were made to run a mile before breakfast, and access to 'frivolous' luxuries such as art and music was severely restricted. The inherent contradiction in 'plain folk' making huge fortunes from luxury foodstuffs is not hard

¹⁷'Drink Cadbury's Cocoa', *Illustrated London News*, 1886, p. 655.

¹⁸The image is available at: 'Drink Cadbury's Cocoa', *The Advertising Archives* <http://www.advertisingarchives.co.uk/en/asset/show_zoom_window_popup.html?asset=24209&location=grid&asset_list=24209&basket_item_id=> [accessed 17 February 2013]. Exact details of the original are unavailable; further information was not forthcoming from Cadbury's archives.

to see; however the Cadbury brothers did their best to ensure that their money did not just benefit themselves.

Initially, this took the form of building a new factory several miles outside Birmingham city centre, on a specially acquired site that they named 'Bournville'. This 'factory in a garden' was created specifically to move production away from the cramped, unhealthy, insanitary conditions of central Birmingham, and to provide workers with a pleasant environment in which to do their work. The firm created recreation grounds, gardens and sports facilities for their workers and, by the 1890s, were commencing work on Bournville village. This community was planned as an affordable alternative to the badly built back-to-back housing that was springing up in industrial towns and cities across the country, with Birmingham no exception. One of the main concepts behind the Bournville plan was the restriction of the number of houses per acre, not only allowing light and air to circulate between buildings, but also to give each house a big enough garden to supply the industrious inhabitant with all the fruit and vegetables he and his family would need.

Cadbury also employed female workers, and in their white factory uniforms they were known locally as 'Cadbury's Angels'; another designation of perfected femininity. Upon getting married, however, women's contracts were politely terminated, as the company did not want to 'take mothers away from their homes and children.'¹⁹ For Cadbury workers who lived in Bournville, there was therefore a strict gender code in practice. Men went out to work, leaving their wives and children at home in the cottages that had been so thoughtfully designed as to allow the housewife a 'restful glimpse of green'²⁰ from the kitchen window where she would be spending the majority of her time. Upon arriving home, the man would need to tend his garden in order to fulfil his dual role as provider not only of the modern necessity of money, but also of actual food. The restorative power of physical labour was much vaunted by George Cadbury, who felt that when men had been working indoors all day they should be encouraged to spend their leisure hours outside. While he was happy to use their labour, indoors and at machines producing luxury goods, he was genuinely concerned with their well-being – as long as that well-being involved a suitably healthy, manly use of their time.

In this respect it follows on, then, that the advertisements that Cadbury's chose for their products reflected the values that suffused their factory and their village. These values of fixed gender roles, healthy hard work and self-sufficiency bring us back immediately to the values demonstrated so well in *The Sinews of Old England*. As Sonya Rose puts it:

to be manly was to be honourable and respectable, which meant being brave, strong and independent. For a woman, by contrast, to be honourable and respectable meant to have the virtues of sexual purity, domesticity and motherhood.²¹

Bournville was to be populated with angelic women, manly men and chubby children, the living embodiments of the family in Hicks's painting; and the advertisements encouraged the general public to bring those qualities straight into their homes by purchasing Cadbury's Cocoa.

The idea of separate spheres and gender roles was not new to the nineteenth century, but the discussion had reached a new level of urgency, as women started to demand equal rights in the workplace and the polling booth, and men's roles were called into question not only by women but also by the rise of the machine and the radically different landscape of

¹⁹ For a description of the 'Cadbury's Angels' and the company's rules surrounding the employment of women see: Carl Chinn, *The Cadbury Story: A Short History* (Studley: Brewin Books Ltd, 1998), p. 32.

²⁰ W. Alexander Harvey, *The Model Village and Its Cottages: Bournville* (London: Batsford, 1906), p. 18.

²¹ Rose, p. 15.

labour in which they found themselves. By reasserting traditional gender roles, an artist like Hicks could appeal to the side of the public which did not want to be reminded of the changing world:

There was a long tradition of providing charmingly idyllic views of rural life, and it was well understood that it was acceptable to give a largely urban public an idealised picture of what might be, rather than what was, since this agreeable fiction strengthened belief in the simplicity and innocence of the countryside.²²

Indeed, Thompson goes on to describe Hicks as an ‘illusionist, because he made everyday life seem to be what they wanted it to be.’²³ Later in the century, when the debates are still more prevalent, Cadbury turns to such traditional images of what people ‘wanted life to be’ in order to place their product within a reassuring, familiar context of a rural England; where men knew how to be men and women knew their place. Both of the images discussed here are, among many other things, examples of a Victorian nostalgia for an historic Britain – and an historic, heroic British race – that never really existed. However, the imaginary nature of the ideal did not stop people yearning for it, or indeed trying to create it in such ventures as Bournville village.

²² F. M. L. Thompson, ‘Painter of Victorian Life’, *History Today*, 33 (1983), 42–4 (p. 42).

²³ Thompson, p. 42.

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