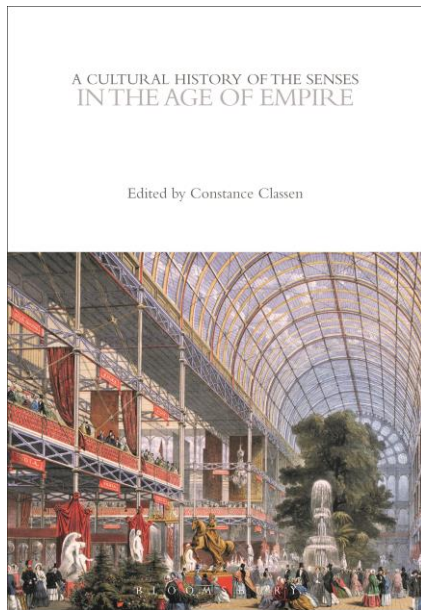


BOOK REVIEW

A Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Empire, Vol. 5, ed. Constance Classen (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). 276 pp. Hardback, £70.

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Constance Classen has brought together a diverse and stimulating collection of essays on the senses in the age of empire. Classen, as general editor of the *Cultural History of the Senses* series, spanning from antiquity to the twenty-first century, places the senses under examination from a range of fascinating historical, social, and cultural perspectives: from the rapidly changing city to the market place; from religious ‘sensory values’ to philosophical, scientific, and medical discourse. *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Empire* (1800-1920) is

volume five of six. It offers an extraordinarily rich and compelling exploration of the senses, enabling the reader to consider, through a broad range of cultural discourse, a period of rapid technological and social change with fresh sensitivity to everyday experience.

Kate Flint, in her chapter ‘The Social Life of the Senses’, draws on Dickens’s ‘Covent Garden Market’ from *Sketches by Boz* (1836), an essay describing, with vivid clarity, the sights and sounds of the marketplace. Flint then offers analysis of Phoebus Levin’s painting *Covent Garden Market* (1864), perceptively observing the way ‘no unifying perspective or clear sight lines mimics, through our viewing practice, the experience of having our attention pulled first one way, then another’ (pp. 28-29). An array of writers, from Wordsworth and De Quincey to Georg Simmel and Ruskin, are judiciously deployed, addressing issues from the conditions of

modern life that create a sense of isolation, to the appeal of the natural world. The array of sources and examples employed by Flint weave a broad picture that alights on detail to illuminate sensory experience. For example, the episode in Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), when the mill operatives touch Margaret's 'shawl or gown to ascertain the exact material' (quoted in Flint, p. 40), produces a network of correspondences. Flint guides the reader from the streets of Milton through a productive discussion of the body, dress material, 'fashionable norms' – the 'minute differences of material cut and decoration' on which fashion depended (p. 40) – and nineteenth-century women's magazines on codes of behaviour and etiquette. Gustave Doré's illustration, *Women Fingering Clothes in a Street Market* (1872), is another of the many wonderful images that add depth and interest to each chapter in the book.

Alain Corbin's chapter, 'Urban Sensations: The Shifting Sensecape of the City', is first-rate on the features and changes in cities that contributed to 'shaping the daily sensory experience' (p. 48). It focuses on technical developments that profoundly transformed 'the city's sensorial space', from gas lighting to new sewer systems and the management of waste. The chapter is concerned primarily with Paris and covers 'anxieties over odours', 'a major preoccupation of urban dwellers' (p. 55). While the arguments may not feel new, they are eloquent and important, particularly on the social significance of attitudes to filth and dirt. The chapter reminds the reader of seminal work on this subject from the 1980s, such as *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. Indeed, Corbin's acknowledgements on the final page reveal this chapter to be from his book *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odour and the French Social Imagination*, translated from the French by Miriam Kochan, Christopher Prendergast, and Roy Porter in 1986. Corbin's chapter works well within Classen's collection even though the material on social attitudes to dirt is constantly being revisited, reanalysed, and revitalised through historical and cultural scholarship, for instance in Lee Jackson's *Dirty Old London: The Fight Against Filth*

(2014).²⁵⁹ Though the material does not break any new ground, it is an important contribution to this cultural history and one that resonates with David Barnes's consideration of the ways in which London and Paris managed public health concerns over the disposal of waste through sewer construction. Barnes's chapter is a wide-ranging and rewarding history of medical practice, closing with a discussion of 'diagnostic technology and reading of the body' (p. 156). He examines the technologies that transformed 'the direct encounter between the physician's senses and the patient's body' (p. 159), including the thermometer, sphygmomanometer (a device for measuring blood pressure), and X-ray.

Chapter seven marks a distinct change of pace with Nicolas Daly's brisk, but satisfying, survey of 'The Senses in Literature', followed by Classen's own contribution: a graceful approach to art from the Romantics to the Futurists. Classen takes the reader through painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts with skilful aplomb. Before tackling the avant-garde and Futurism, Classen even considers performance and architectural space via a brief, but gratifying, discussion of William Beckford, James Wyatt, and William Morris.

It is this combination of developments in medical science ('Seeing Hearing and Smelling Disease', chapter six) alongside lucid discussion of art and the senses 'from the Romantics to the Futurists' (chapter eight) that makes the volume such a valuable resource for examining the senses across disciplines. Popular histories such as Liza Picard's *Victorian London: The Life of a City, 1840-1870* (2005), and Judith Flander's *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London* (published more recently in 2012) beautifully evoke the sights, sounds, and smells of the Victorian city and are compellingly readable. For this book on the senses, there was a danger of creating a disparate collection of chapters that sit together uneasily. The sheer range of topics needed to be covered in a book on the senses from 1800 to 1920 – social life, the built environment, religion, philosophy, science, medicine, art, and media – could be cumbersome.

²⁵⁹ Jackson's *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) was reviewed in *Victorian Network's* issue on 'Victorian Dirt' (Winter 2015).

Yet all these areas are addressed in this slim volume, by authors who delve meticulously into their chosen subject matter. Though, perhaps inevitably, given the range of material, the essays do not speak to each other as well as they might in a single-authored volume or, indeed, one less ambitious in scope.

A cultural history of the senses is a tall order and this volume on the *Age of Empire* succeeds in offering content that is wide-ranging and surprisingly detailed. For example, David Barnes discusses René Laënnec, medical listening, and the first stethoscope, before broadening the scope to the smell of disease in the form of nineteenth-century debates on illness during the Great Stink afflicting London in 1858, to the ‘fetid emanations’ from the sewers of Paris twenty two summers later (p. 153). Robert Jütte’s chapter on science and philosophy, which provides analyses on the physiology of each of the senses, is also outstanding in its detail and sits very well alongside Barnes’s on medicine. The multiple approaches to the senses on offer require one to step back and consider each piece as a thought-provoking intervention on a much larger subject – though the material is fascinating and judiciously selected. The book concludes with Alison Griffith’s chapter on photography and media. She has innovative ideas to contribute on the senses and nineteenth-century institutional spaces, specifically museums and prisons. This book succeeds as a history that offers illuminating analysis and discussion necessary to sketch out the wider social and cultural debates. Yet the chapters will undoubtedly offer fresh perspectives and insights to readers with expertise in the subject matter of individual essays in the volume.

At this banquet of the senses there is plenty to digest, but each chapter should be savoured. There are no footnotes to detract from the body of the text and minimal, but helpful, notes over several pages at the end. The bibliography is extensive and varied. Moving from the marketplace (in chapter three) to religion (in chapter four) is quite a shift in gear, but the editor has arranged these varied chapters as logically as the diverse material will allow, in order to construct a wide-ranging history of the period in one slim volume. Classen has written an excellent introduction, which succinctly locates the diverse subjects that follow in

their historical contexts. In this wealth of rich ideas, certain chapters are especially compelling: Erika Rappaport's 'The Senses in the Marketplace', for example, is a feast for the senses and a delight to read, offering a sustained approach to this lively subject, the best I have encountered in any history of the period. A chapter on food, class, and diet would have been a worthwhile addition to this study, but whichever of its chapters you turn to, or if you read the book from cover to cover in one sitting, you will find yourself wanting to go back for a second helping – to immerse yourself in this rich sensory exploration of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century history and culture.

Bibliography

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