



A History of Private Life, Volume IV

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For lovers of history, the appearance of a new volume in A HISTORY OF PRIVATE LIFE has become an annual event. First published in France between 1985 and 1987, the series has been published in the United States by Harvard University Press in the excellent translation of Arthur Goldhammer. Each volume presents a loosely unified set of essays by several contributors. Like its predecessors, this penultimate volume is beautifully produced, with a large central section of color plates and black-and-white illustrations scattered throughout the text; the illustrations alone are worth the price of the book.

Like its predecessors, too, but even more so, volume 4 reveals a marked ideological bias: What has been an irritant in earlier volumes has evolved into a major problem. Perhaps that is to be expected in a survey that centers on the nineteenth century and the bourgeois interior. Several of the contributors barely attempt to suppress their contempt for “middle-class” values and above all for the family, which is personified and demonized her rather in the manner of Marxist sloganeering. Indeed, there is a good deal of crude personification in these pages, exemplified by these lines from editor Michelle Perrot’s conclusion: “The nineteenth century made a desperate effort to stabilize the boundary between public and private by mooring it to the family, with the father as sovereign.” In some ways the new history turns out to be the old history (or one discredited version of it), disguised.

Yet at the same time, there is a wealth of information and provocative reflection in this volume. A chapter on “The Secret of the Individual” considers such diverse topics as the democratization of the portrait (via the photograph) and the enormous vogue for the piano, dubbed “the lady’s hashish” by Edmond de Goncourt. Another absorbing chapter, “Cries and Whispers,” explores the dark side of private life in modern, industrialized societies; among the topics considered here are the growing fascination with “moral monstrosity”--particularly with violent crime.

Yet, with all its flaws, this installment leaves the reader impatient to plunge into the final volume.

Sources for Further Study

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