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Shame and Modernity in Britain: 1890 to the Present

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Shame and Modernity in Britain: 1890 to the Present

This book continues a thesis that we sketched in a previous volume entitled *Cultures of Shame Exploring Crime and Morality in Britain 1600-1900* (2010). Whilst this explored shame at work in the nineteenth century, the twentieth century also offered further opportunities to extend our thesis denying shame's often simplistic identification with rural societies and varied conceptions of the 'primitive'. Likewise, during the twentieth century new methods of shaming arose, whilst older ones acquired a new vibrancy.

Much of the material discussed in this book argues that twentieth century public spheres have constructed arenas in which conduct can be discussed, scrutinised and censured. In these shame is regularly reshaped, although its purposes remain substantially the same. Yet twentieth century people have become capable of fighting against shame and occasionally deploy what we have termed 'anti-shame'. That is the concerted effort of individuals, caught in shameful situations seeking to somehow fight back. We also investigate culpability or what we may seek to term blameworthiness. Culpability, likewise, involves the exposure of blame for a mistake, misdemeanour or piece of negligence. The discovery of culpability and the shame that goes with the apportioning of blame seemed to gather pace within the twentieth century as a consequence of modernity and its mechanisms. Culpability, within a developed public sphere, showcased people's behaviour and instances of

questionable conduct to other people, who constituted a much broader audience than in the previous century.

Public shame in the context of the twentieth century was arguably more transitory despite the fact that it reached its audience more quickly. It became less serious because it was less communal in nature, and did not persist as noted in other chronological and spatial contexts. Privacy, thus, could atomise audiences and attention just as much as it gave individuals the opportunity to enjoy isolation with their own thoughts. Insights into twentieth century episodes uncovered new sites where shame had been positively reinvigorated, not simply by social changes, but also by events or special circumstances created by the modern world. Technologies of representation, reading and discussion meant the consumption of impressions and opinions had become an accepted part of society. Technological advances also provided opportunities to hide or conceal shame or to enable otherwise shameful activities.

We also discovered the enduring nature of something that we term the 'archaeology of reputation'. Essentially the investigation of the past actions and conduct of others (generally by an interested party). This phenomenon might be motivated by personal connection to the individual, or by an awakened and heightened historical interest in the facts of an individual's life. As such, it has a close relationship with the concept of private shame.

Each of the succeeding chapters elaborates a story which focusses upon central experiences of shame. Each elaborates a theme and these, when taken together,

provide a relatively broad study of shame's survival and prosperity into modernity and beyond.

Chapter Two looks at early attempts to apply shame to individuals suspected of refusing to engage in military conflict during The Great War – an occasion where new stresses associated with modern warfare dramatically altered expectations and behaviour. In particular, it focuses in on the shaming initiatives aimed at conscientious objectors and the extent to which these tactics were effective. Chapter Three traces the life and times of the one-time popular demagogue, politician and hero of the turf, Horatio Bottomley, who was initially seen as a populist patriot par excellence but was subsequently exposed as 'shameless'.

The fourth chapter uses the case of Harold Davidson, the Rector of Stiffkey, in the 1930s to examine the consumption of shame and its, often systematic, repackaging for new times and media. It thus introduces the analytical concept of the 'archaeology of reputation', involving the pursuit of the 'truth' about individuals and incidents with the intent of realising and telling a credible narrative.

Chapter five covers the subject of abortion in England and Scotland during the twentieth century to present a different aspect of shame in modern British society. It shows that women felt surprisingly little in the way of shame after undergoing a termination. Yet, strangely, this was not really what society thought should happen, and intermittent levels of stigma about the choice to abort unwanted children persisted.

The sixth chapter looks at the sex scandal associated with the late MP Lord Antony Lambton in the 1970s. This not only resulted in his own very public downfall and disgrace, alongside various official inquiries into the threat of a potential security risk, but also brought about debates over the extent to which intrusion into the private lives of public figures was justified by its scrutiny of how they perform their professional duties.

The seventh chapter investigates the case of one-time television personality Lady Isobel Barnett who tragically committed suicide after a conviction for shoplifting. Her status, fame and subsequent downfall and the shame she received functions as a study of the last gasp of 'presumptive shame' as it demonstrates its potency amongst individuals from a certain generation, background and culture of service.

The final chapter in the work investigates the experiences of gay men and women in our armed forces. Within this particular context, a more liberal or tolerant attitude to homosexuality, evident across modern British society more widely, has been largely absent from the military arena until much more recently. Yet the Gay Pride and Stonewall style quest for citizenship faced something of a backlash from proponents of 'Queer Theory' who despised conformism and the activities of homosexuals prepared to acquire full citizenship on the heterosexual world's terms.

The conclusion to this book then offers a consideration of the path shame has trod throughout the modern era, noting how it is still being remade and reshaped to perform new functions. This is especially true when it is considered that the writ of

law and modern methods of control and regulation have failed and have been manifestly found wanting.