

**Review: Edith Hall and Henry Stead, *A People's History of Classics: Class and Greco-Roman Antiquity in Britain and Ireland, 1689 to 1939* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020) 642pp. ISBN 978-1-138-21283-1, £96.00.**

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AT THE BEGINNING of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), the young Jude Fawley reveals to the quack doctor Vilbert his ambition to learn Greek and Latin, and attend university in Christminster. The itinerant physician is familiar with the university town, and remarks that there 'the very sons of the old women who do the washing can talk in Latin', even if it is merely 'dog-Latin' or 'cat-Latin' to him.<sup>1</sup> In return for Jude advertising his business, Vilbert promises to give him a pair of Greek and Latin grammars the next time he visits the area. But Vilbert forgets about his promise, and Jude encounters one of the first disappointments in his quest for knowledge and advancement.

Hardy's novel about a stonemason longing to be a scholar is one of the most well-known interpretations of Victorian working-class intellectual aspiration. But Jude Fawley had many real-life brethren. Throughout the long-nineteenth century, many working-class individuals sought to better their lot by pursuing self-education through organizations, such as the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, founded in 1826. These institutional efforts were buttressed by the increasing availability of cheap compendia of knowledge, such as John Cassell's *Popular Educator* (1853-6), which sought to give 'the vulgar people more knowledge for a "Penny" than the lords used to have for a pound'.<sup>2</sup> However, guarded by the linguistic barriers of Latin and Greek, classics represented an elite form of knowledge that was far more challenging for members of the working classes to gain through self-education alone.

Covering the period from the Glorious Revolution to the Second World War, Edith Hall and Henry Stead's *A People's History of Classics* represents the first substantial investigation of British and Irish working-class receptions of the ancient

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2000) pp.20-1.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Hall and Henry Stead, *A People's History of Classics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020) p.54.

world. Owing to a paucity of sources, non-elite engagement with Greece and Rome has long been a lacuna at the heart of classical reception studies. This long-awaited study endeavours to correct that deficiency by recording the interactions of a diverse array of working-class individuals and groups with classics over two-and-a-half centuries. To illuminate this under-studied aspect of cultural history, Hall and Stead employ a multiplicity of sources, including 'memoirs, autobiographies, Trade Union collections, poetry, factory archives, playscripts, artefacts and documents in regional museums'.<sup>3</sup>

The book will be of interest to students and scholars of classical reception, British social history, and the history of education. Its text is complemented with 135 black-and-white illustrations, six maps, and an associated website [www.classicsandclass.info](http://www.classicsandclass.info). It will be available in an open-access format from 2023. The book's title references A.L. Morton's *A People's History of England* (1938)—one of the first books to chronicle the experiences of ordinary English people—and builds upon the pioneering work of Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001). Hall and Stead's study was also preceded by their edited collection of essays: *Greek and Roman Classics in the British Struggle for Social Reform* (2015).

The first part of *A People's History of Classics*, 'Canons, media and genres' (chapters one to eight), places into context the aims, sources and span of the book, as well as its chronological and regional focus. The second part, 'Communities' (chapters eight to twelve), examines classical reception amid a number of diverse groups, including among Nonconformists, within organised working-class education, and in Irish, Scottish and Welsh contexts. The third part, 'Underdogs, underclasses, underworlds' (chapters thirteen to eighteen), analyses the influence of classics on a group of activists and autodidacts, as well as examining some non-traditional sites of reception, including asylums, brothels, fairgrounds and prisons. The final part, 'Working identities' (chapters nineteen to twenty-five), places work back at the heart of working-class receptions, examining how labour could be perceived through a classical lens. It continues with a survey of a number of classicists active in trade unionism, socialism and communism, before concluding with an examination of David Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937).

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p.12.

Although working-class literacy expanded throughout the nineteenth century, many individuals encountered the legacy of Greece and Rome outside the covers of a book. Some of the most illuminating chapters of this study are those which explore the non-literary sources of working-class reception, such as those on the visual environment, theatrical productions, and the Staffordshire Potteries (chapters six, seven and twenty-one). Two of the most original of these are 'Classical underworlds' and 'Class and the classical body' (chapters seventeen and eighteen), which examine the ways in which athletes, dancers and entertainers sought to personify certain aspects of the ancient world using their own bodies. But, as the brief section on classics and prostitution in the former chapter demonstrates, many of these kinds of reception can never be fully recovered. As the authors recognise, even the use of literary sources is fraught with difficulty, since there is often far less evidence of working-class reading habits.

Much of the book concentrates upon the experiences of a varied group of working-class autodidacts (albeit mostly male and white), often focussing upon the alternative or subversive ends to which they put classics. The authors present a number of case studies in which classical knowledge is used to inform left-wing political activity in Britain and Ireland, charting its appropriation by a variety of radicals, Chartists, socialists and communists from the late-eighteenth to the early-twentieth centuries. Their political affiliations aside, the majority of the autodidacts depicted in the book gained their classical learning against the odds, and employed it to transform themselves from dockers, carpenters or miners into merchants, journalists or trade-union leaders. A perfect example of this is John Cassell, producer of the *Popular Educator*, who rose from being a child labourer in a Manchester cotton mill to become one of mid-Victorian Britain's most successful publishers. Although not all enjoyed Cassell's rags-to-riches trajectory, the authors emphasize how classics operated throughout this period not only as a badge of intellectual accomplishment, but also as a master key that could unlock access to social mobility.

There are few errors in the text, although one or two inaccuracies have crept in. For instance, Irish people usually refer to their native language simply as 'Irish', rather than 'Gaelic', which refers to the entire language family of Irish, Scots

Gaelic and Manx.<sup>4</sup> Apart from such minor imperfections, the book's main limitation is perhaps the difficulty of knowing how representative all of its subjects are of the working-class experience, and how selective its authors have been in the perspectives that they have chosen to depict. Many of the autodidacts portrayed in its pages were clearly exceptional individuals, while others accrued enough intellectual or monetary capital to transcend their working-class backgrounds.

The authors make no secret of the fact that their study is driven by a left-leaning, anti-elitist agenda to recover non-traditional receptions of Greece and Rome. But, in their earnestness to celebrate working-class achievement, they can also simplify what may be a more complex picture of the connections between class and education. One important example quoted in the book epitomises this problem. Hall and Stead's starting point is Edmund Burke's comment in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) that, without the aristocracy and the church to protect it, 'learning will be cast into the mire and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude'.<sup>5</sup> But, while the authors portray him as an arrogant defender of elitism, Burke did not benefit from an exclusive public-school or Oxbridge classical education. Instead, he gained his formative schooling in his native Ireland, where he attended a 'hedge school' in Cork and a Quaker school in Kildare, before going on to study law at Trinity College, Dublin. Burke's own education therefore possesses exactly the unorthodox, Dissenting and subaltern features that the authors extol repeatedly throughout the book for their working-class subjects.

Such reservations aside, *A People's History of Classics* is a timely and important book, which will help to provide, as its authors suggest, 'a new ancestral backstory for a discipline in need of a democratic makeover'.<sup>6</sup> Its publication marks a watershed in the study of working-class classical reception in the British Isles and Ireland, and Hall and Stead are to be commended for excavating a stratum of social history that has been for too long obscured by the layers above it.

While many studies have examined classical reception in the context of gender, race and sexuality, class has remained a poor cousin. This book goes far towards remedying that fault, while providing numerous starting points for others

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.207.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.537.

to extend scholarship in the field. Presenting another facet of the 'self-help' advocated by the campaigner Samuel Smiles, this book shows how classics could be used in place of technical education by members of the working classes to challenge their social limitations.

Fittingly, the words 'class' and 'classics' derive from the same Latin noun, *classis*, which originally referred to the economic subdivision of ancient Roman society. The same sense of attributing social or cultural value to people or objects is preserved in our modern use of the words. As a result, it is easy to see how the study of the ancient world has long been utilised to privilege some social groups (white, male, wealthy), while excluding others (non-white, female, working-class). *A People's History of Classics* gives a platform to a chorus of marginalized voices rarely heard in the study of Greek and Roman reception. In doing so, its authors put class back at the heart of classical reception, and make a lot of real-life Judes a lot less obscure.



BIOGRAPHY: Quentin J. Broughall is an independent scholar and writer. His research interests are centred on classical reception in Britain and the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially how perceptions of imperial Rome evolved. His forthcoming book *Gore Vidal and antiquity: sex, politics and religion* will be published by Bloomsbury as part of its series *Classical Receptions in Twentieth-Century Writing*.

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