



Review of Richard Stott, *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in 19th Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) 376 pp.

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The “jolly fellows” of the title are the drinkers, brawlers, and pranksters of nineteenth century America. Richard Stott’s intention is to explore the “masculine spaces” (p. 1) of nineteenth-century America in order to examine why men both started and stopped fighting. Stott’s *Jolly Fellows* appears to be a vast undertaking as its research extends out from each end of the nineteenth century and encompasses the vast geographical space of America. However, this is deftly managed by Stott who provides the reader with a thorough overview of the connections and movements of this subset of the population over the extensive scope of his topic.

The violence that Stott examines reaches beyond the boundaries of tavern brawls as it infiltrated sport, frontier life, minstrelsy, and the temperance movement. It describes an aggressive world, where masculine behaviors such as gambling, fighting, heavy drinking, and playing pranks were the vehicles that enabled men to engage with each other. This particular performance of homosocial behavior became known as jolly fellowship, which was not only tolerated but condoned by men who did not participate in its rituals. That said, however, Stott makes it clear that the type of man who filled this masculine space were those who could be described as “manly,” although Stott does not make an attempt to define this beyond stating they engaged in jolly fellowship activities. This means it lacks the insight into types of manliness that would have been gained from a more thorough examination of the men who reveled in their jolly fellowship and those who avoided it. But discussion of jolly fellowship does provide a framework through which Stott interrogates codes of appropriate behavior amongst men in general. Stott perceives with regard to the mock trials which occurred in Mississippi that the victim was often in breach of male protocol, and when discussing the pranks in Kentucky he interprets it as an act of gaining power over another. These linked, and yet slightly different, interpretations of the motivation for jolly fellowship could have been explored in greater depth, which is probably a consequence of choosing to study such a wide era and physical space.

Traditionally manliness is associated with discipline in this period, and Stott illustrates how this self-control infiltrated the boundaries of jolly fellowship through a range of examples, which include head butting contests. Stott explains that these were pre-arranged and enacted with restrictions placed upon the method of head butting. Stott is at great pains to insist to his readers that jolly fellowship was not an uncontrolled and uncontrollable force, stating that men “stopped drinking before getting drunk and often would stop gambling before they lost their money” (p. 56), but he fails to provide sufficient evidence to back up this view.

This text extends into a consideration of race relations, as Stott discusses how minstrel performances fed into the themes that were prevalent in jolly fellowship. The “controlled chaos” (p. 175) and the hyper-masculine stage persona of the minstrel reflected the jolly fellow, and even their songs focused upon fighting and drinking. Stott argues that minstrelsy was a type of prank in itself in its embrace of the masquerade and he connects the humor of the show to that of the jolly fellow. This is a fascinating discussion surrounding these two cultures and one that produces some of the most productive insights in this study. As Stott charts the movements and the changes within jolly fellowship, the reader is also taken through some rather uncomfortable reading, particularly regarding the treatment of minorities, as he explores how the Ku Klux Klan’s roots were embedded within jolly fellowship.

With regard to the relations between the genders, Stott’s research is less than illuminating; he does not fully explore the sexuality of the men involved in jolly fellowship, despite including the story of a drunken fight between two men who tore off each other’s clothes, which is surely a revealing act. This story has been remembered by a tavern owner’s daughter, but Stott does not comment on her—or their—possible motivation for this act, or even attempt to contextualize it. In fact, sexual aggression is described as the motivation behind some of the jolly fellows’ acts, yet Stott’s argument remains purely focused upon the masculine space as a separate entity, and therefore he spends little time interrogating its impact upon the opposite sex.

This study of violence and the American male experience is often mediated through alcohol. Stott argues that drinking possibly provided an excuse for the behavior in this period, rather than it being the cause, although he does concede that it was part of the reason for the jolly fellows conduct. Continual connections between alcohol consumption, fighting, and playing pranks are frequently displayed in this text which cause Stott to declare that, despite the temperance movement, to not drink in this period meant emasculation. Stott’s careful overview of the tensions and shifting power which occurred between the temperance movement and the jolly fellows would have benefited from being explored in greater detail, but, on the whole, his analysis of the synergies between alcohol and violence is productive and detailed.

This well illustrated study contains some fascinating and amusing retellings of jolly fellowship from a variety of sources, which serve to make this a lively and enjoyable read. The individual cases of jolly fellowship that are examined also help illuminate its wider context. Although it felt as though the text was trying to wrestle and pin down an area that was far too broad to manage, its wide focus did enable the author to provide a useful insight into the extent of jolly fellowship’s integration throughout America and comment on the degree to which it was able to assert power over the time period. This is a worthwhile book and considerably contributes to the body of work that exists in this area; however, it also feels like it is a starting point from which, I hope, much more research will continue to build on.

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