

Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 310pp., ISBN: 9780199594436, £20.00.

At the core of Claire Langhamer's *The English in Love* is the idea that mid-twentieth century England witnessed an emotional revolution in which pragmatic notions of marriage were replaced by romantic ideals that suggested that marriages should be based upon love. Langhamer argues, however, that the mid-century desire to place romance, emotional compatibility, sexual desire and personal growth at the heart of matrimony actually destabilised the institution of marriage. Langhamer persuasively demonstrates that whilst the ideal of romantic love as the basis of marriage may have seemed appealing in the post-war years, it soon became apparent that love was an unstable foundation for matrimony as love could fade, spouses could fail to sexually satisfy one another and married life could fail to live up to its promise of self-fulfilment. Divided into three parts which explore the nature of love in the mid-twentieth century, the types of behaviour that the new romantic ideals fashioned, and the changing nature of committed relationships, the book explores the shifting understandings of romance, love, sexual desire and commitment in mid-century England in intimate detail.

Through the use of a wide-range of source material, most notably diaries and reports from the Mass Observation archives, Langhamer has written an intimate and affectionate portrait of romantic life in the mid-twentieth century. By far the greatest asset of *The English in Love* is its willingness to let the testimonies of ordinary people speak for themselves. Extensive quotations from Mass Observation testimonies are the basis of much of the book's analysis, and the inclusion of these voices lends Langhamer's work a real sense of warmth and authenticity.

The idea that love has a history is demonstrated throughout as Langhamer deftly describes its unstable characterization in English society and popular culture and its varying relationships with sex and social standing between the 1920s and the 1970s. Less convincing however is Langhamer's depiction of 'emotional revolution'. Langhamer's assertion that the relationship between love, sex and marriage in the 1970s differed from that of the 1920s is valid but her account of the transition is at times problematic. The author frequently refers to 'the mid-century' as a single entity which compromises her account of change over time; throughout the book Langhamer uses sources from the 1930s alongside, rather than in comparison to, those from the 1950s and 1960s, thus emphasising aspects of continuity rather than change. In the introduction Langhamer states that 'Material circumstance both shaped and constrained, but

always framed, the ways in which people crafted their emotional worlds' (p.19), yet, for an account which is centred around the notion of revolution, not enough is made of the very real social and economic changes which occurred across the period in question.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of *The English in Love*, is the way in which it quietly dismantles the notion of the 1960s as a period of sexual revolution and disrupted social order. The 1960s are frequently held aloft as a moment of intense social and cultural change, particularly in relation to sexual freedom and expression and for many years the Sixties have been viewed as a watershed moment in history marking the divide between 'modern' and 'contemporary'. Langhamer's work, however, deals very little with the 'age of promiscuity', instead suggesting that the Sixties were a 'golden age of romance' (p.11). Langhamer demonstrates the continued potency of romantic love and the desire for matrimony in the Sixties, suggesting in her conclusion that it may be more accurate to characterise the 1970s as the real era of sexual revolution (p.210). There has been little historical inquiry into the impact and legacy of the so-called sexual revolution (for the most part, the history of sexuality and gender since the 1960s has been examined only in the context of broad outline studies of the twentieth century) and so it is difficult to challenge Langhamer's claims.¹ As we move further in to the twenty-first century however and historians begin to research the last third of the twentieth century in its own right, it will be interesting to see whether Langhamer's account holds up to scrutiny.

¹ Such outline studies include: Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-century Britain* (London: Atlantic, 2003) and Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (London: Routledge, 2007).

Overall *The English in Love* is a good example of how the history of emotions, often thought of as a niche area of scholarly inquiry, can be incorporated in to broader histories of social and cultural phenomena. The book is engaging and highly readable and Langhamer's affection and respect for her subjects is evident throughout. Whilst Langhamer's account of social change is not always clear, her willingness to engage with the voices of 'ordinary' people has resulted in some insightful analysis and she should be commended for injecting some much needed heart into the social history of modern England.

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