

Jon Stobart, *Life in the Georgian Parsonage. Morals, Material Goods and the English Clergy* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024).
xx + 392 pp.

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There is an unfortunate tendency among many historians to relegate study of the clergy to the disciplines of theology and church history, as though this group of men and their families acted only within a very limited social framework circumscribed by religiosity. This kind of thinking has resulted in a considerable gap in our knowledge and understanding of the past. It is well understood that religion permeated society in earlier centuries and that clergy consequently played important roles as both authority figures and examples of piety. Yet, somehow this understanding has not translated to any particular interest among historians in clergy as people.

This monograph is a decisive step in rectifying that oversight. Moving the discussion to a more specific context, Jon Stobart notes that the clergy as a distinct social and cultural group have been largely overlooked in studies of consumption and domestic material culture. In those few studies that do exist, he observes, primary consideration is given to clergy at the episcopal level rather than to those at the parish level, resulting in a near-total absence in the historiography of this large and influential social group. In this new study, Stobart gives the English parish clergy their due, bringing their consumer behavior and domestic material culture to the fore.

By placing the parish clergy into the socio-spatial context of their homes and tying them to broader changes in domestic material culture, Stobart contends that we can gain a better understanding of who they were as people. As the book's title suggests, the author considers the moral and ethical dimensions of consumer behavior to help explain the particular character of clerical consumption. He moves far beyond established narratives of goods as markers of status, wealth, and re-

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fined taste to consider the ways in which they can be read to reveal the struggle of the clergy to construct and communicate their character and identity while at the same time striking a balance between godliness and worldliness that was acceptable to their parishioners, to wider society, and, not least, to themselves.

This complex and challenging investigation is arranged according to four broad themes. The first considers the cultural, political, and moral contexts in which clerical consumption occurred. The second delves into the empirical sources, exploring the nature of the clergy's domestic goods, the changes to their homes, and the ways in which they managed their expenditures. The third theme is an analysis of the social practices that shaped clerical consumption, and the fourth ties the preceding three together by venturing down to the micro level to concentrate on individual clergymen and the ways in which they navigated social and moral imperatives that were often at odds. Taken together, these themes combine to provide an impressively wide-ranging analysis of both eighteenth-century English society at large and of individual lives.

It is no exaggeration to say that this is a very deep dive into the environment Stobart is exploring. He employs a wide range of source material to reconstruct life in the Georgian parsonage and the world outside its walls, drawing from a diverse array of evidence that includes satirical texts and prints, house designs and floorplans, sermons, personal diaries, account books and probate inventories. Many of the materials are reproduced in the book as illustrations that make a rich addition to the text. He takes a cross-disciplinary approach with these materials, combining social and cultural history, economic history, and religious history to create a vivid picture of the lived lives of the eighteenth-century parish clergy in all their human-ness.

Stobart has a special knack for provoking insightful questions and providing equally insightful observations and analyses in almost the next breath. Not only is he a meticulous researcher, but he is also a skillful story-teller, weaving excerpts from clerical diaries in with his own pithy comments, such as in his observation on page 255 that parson John Longe “was not uncaring but seems to have had little affinity or personal knowledge of the individual circumstances of his flock: they were not things he felt worth noting in his diary”. These qualities work in tandem to bring Stobart's study subjects to life for the reader on a personal as well as an academic level.

The only real criticism I have about this work is in fact a concern that Stobart may be something of a victim of his own well-earned success in the study of consumption and material culture. That is, there is no question that he is a heavyweight in the field and there is a risk that this new book might be overlooked as merely another addition to that historiography. In fact, this is not a book about

consumption, but rather about a woefully underscrutinized social group in eighteenth-century society, seen through the lens of consumption. In Stobart's own words,

[a]bove all, this book seeks to approach the clergy as human beings: pulled in different directions by competing calls on their time and money; keen to make the most of the social and material opportunities that their livings provided; dutiful to their parishioners and their obligations to charity; subject to the influence of wives, families and neighbours, and (to varying degrees) anxious to be moral and pious in their actions.

Approaching this aim from a consumption and material culture perspective is both ambitious and innovative and Stobart stays absolutely true to his stated intentions. From start to finish, this is a book about clergy. He finds that clergymen were both very much like other respectable householders of their time, seeking comfort and convenience in their homes, enjoying polite and sociable activities with their friends and neighbors, and making use of an expanding world of material goods. At the same time, they differed from other householders in two important ways: first, their standing in their communities gave them social, moral, and religious authority, which brought not only respect but also scrutiny from parishioners and others who were quick to find fault; second, the clergy were an embodiment of fundamental, widely held Christian beliefs that Stobart finds "created an unusual degree of introspection and soul searching about the morality of the social practices and material trappings of consumption".

The degree to which this book makes a groundbreaking contribution to our understanding of eighteenth-century English society cannot be overstated. It is an immensely valuable addition to the historiography and will surely prompt other scholars to take a closer look at the clergy outside church walls, actively taking part in wider society.