



Adam Kuper. *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. 296 pp. \$29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-03589-8.



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Published on H-Histsex (October, 2011)

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Incest or Intimacy: The Victorian Bourgeoisie

The propensity of the English bourgeoisie toward cousin marriage, as well as the close kin networks that their social world revolved around, has not gone unnoticed by historians. But Adam Kuper's *Incest and Influence* is the first monograph-length analysis of the phenomenon outside of studies of Victorian literature. Beginning with a fascinating account of Charles Darwin's thought process when he chose to marry his cousin, Emily Wedgwood, Kuper sets out to explore the extent and significance of incestuous (by modern standards) relationships among the English bourgeoisie, and attempts to uncover social attitudes toward the phenomenon of cousin and in-law marriage. His central argument is that incest was a chosen strategy of the English bourgeoisie used to consolidate and promote the success of particular family networks.

The book is divided into three sections. The first is an account of the extent and attitudes toward cousin and in-law marriage. Chapter 1 looks at references to cousin marriage within literature, drawing on the now vibrant field of writing in this area; the second explores the legal

debate around the prohibition, and then almost annual parliamentary review, of marrying a deceased wife's sister; while the third looks at the scientific work produced by the Darwins and others on inbreeding. As may be expected, there was some debate over the legitimacy of cousin marriage and marriage to a deceased wife's sister, both clearly inspiring considerable discussion among the Victorians. Ultimately however, and especially once the science backed it up, cousin marriage became largely uncontroversial, while feelings toward marriage to a deceased wife's sister were more ambivalent, reflected in its legal status. This is the most successful section of the book, nicely surveying the variety of responses to incest in Victorian culture and how they shifted over the period.

The second and third parts of the book move on to looking at incest as a phenomenon among the English bourgeoisie. In section 2, marriage and intimate relationships within the business and political classes are reviewed, focusing on the banking family networks of the Barclays and Rothschilds, and the exclusive Clapham

Sect (which had its origins in a merchant network, but became a political network in the next generation). Part 3 examines the more exclusive world of intellectual networks, particularly the Bloomsbury Circle. These sections are vibrant and compelling reading, explaining the complex web of marriage ties (or sexual relationships in the case of the Bloomsbury Circle) that linked these family networks over multiple generations. The author combines this web with telling snippets of correspondence that highlight the uses of intimate and romantic language across many familial relationships. Through these case studies, Kuper provides a fascinating glimpse into the intense intimacy that existed in bourgeois family networks—an intimacy that the twentieth century has often viewed as “stifling” and uncomfortable.

At the heart of this book, however, is a conceptual problem. On the one hand, Kuper argues that incest is a cultural construction, defined by the social norms of each culture; on the other hand, there is a presumption throughout that the behavior Kuper describes is incest, at least to modern eyes. This problem is not fully unpacked. A wide variety of intimate behaviors, such as (hetero- and homo-)sexual relationships; marriage; interference in another’s personal life; the use of romantic language in letters; and relationships between a wide range of different family members (parents, children, siblings, cousins, in-laws, and friends) are all lumped together under the definition of “incest.” And, while Kuper provides a wealth of fabulous examples, it is not clear what it all means. We come away with the impression that the English bourgeois family was extremely close-knit and intimate relationships were intense, but how the English family man-

aged these relationships and how they drew the lines between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors between different family members (or what was taboo and what was not) is not delineated.

Moreover, it is not particularly clear to what extent “incestuous” marriages were a “strategy,” so much as the result of the Victorian family’s exclusive family and friend networks, and even less evident whether such a “strategy” led to social, economic, and political successes of these particular networks. This is not necessarily because the latter is not true; indeed, historians of Victorian business have often reflected on the ways that cousin marriage and marriage between the children of business partners consolidated business practices.^[1] But to make such a claim would require a different sort of history that analyzes marriage contracts, the operation of patronage networks, and the movement of economic and cultural capital, to highlight the ways that these intimate relationships enabled success (and also looked at why other family networks were not successful and the nature of their intimate relationships).

In many ways then, *Incest and Influence* raises as many questions as it answers. Yet it is also a timely history that challenges us to delve deeper into the intimate lives of the Victorian family, and provides both a riveting read and useful starting point for future research.

Note

[1]. For example, Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle-Class, 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, 1992).

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Citation: Katie Barclay. Review of Kuper, Adam, *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. October, 2011.

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